

SOHAM
PALWANKAR

GOKHALE FILES



THE #1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

**Gokhale Files
(Not Quite a
Murder Mystery)**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events, and incidents are either the

products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual

persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to following people:

My Parents – For encouraging me to write more.

Anjali Tr. – You are the one who instilled in me, the
love for writing.

Kimaya and Hasti – You are unforgettable in
impact and

forever, my muse.

**Vaibhav, Rajveer, Srujan and all of my friends
at**

Guardian - you have constantly supported me.

To all those who have criticized me till now -
your

criticism is what continues to inspire me.

And to you reader - for choosing to read an
insignificant

15-year old's work

**Man is not what he thinks he is,
he is what he hides.**

— André Malraux

Foreword

“We often read books to escape. But this one, I believe, is read to return—to ourselves, to our shadows, to the mirror we avoid and the truths we blur.”

In Gokhale Files, Soham Palwankar does something quietly radical. He doesn't just tell stories—he exhumes them. He threads delusion and reality into a single narrative cloth, weaving fiction, vulnerability, and philosophical depth into a structure that refuses to fit in a box.

This debut is not just the beginning of an author's journey. It is the record of a mind that has already journeyed far, returned with questions, and built a house out of them

Author's Note

I wrote this book with trembling fingers.

Not because I feared what I might
discover, but because I knew I had already
discovered too much—and still had to
make it beautiful.

This book doesn't belong to a single genre
or tradition. It exists between reality and
delusion,

between fiction and
confession, between invention and
memory. That liminal space is where I've
always felt most alive.

Some pieces in this book are pure
imagination. Others are rooted in lived
experience, cloaked in metaphor, softened
with artifice. You are free to decipher
them. Or not.

What matters is that you feel something. Thanks
for carrying these pages with you.

Acknowledgements

This book would not exist without the
people who believed in me long before I
believed in myself.

To my parents—for giving me both silence
and support, even when they didn't
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read my early works, offered feedback, or
simply asked the right questions. You
made me sharper, braver, better.

To those who broke me—I am grateful.
Every crack was a skylight.

And finally, to all those who I could not mention

Here, you all have been a great source of
inspiration

And guidance for me.

All my friends at Guardian, thank you;

And to you reader, I am grateful, thanks for
choosing to read this book

Chapter 1

The Rain Waits

The train hissed its arrival at Neral station like a sigh, the metal wheels scraping the rails in a rhythm I could never quite catch. Outside the window, rain blurred the world into smeared colours and shifting shapes, the kind that make you question what's real and what's just reflection. I sat alone, clutching a worn leather notebook in one hand, the other tracing the condensation gathering on the glass.

Matheran had always been a place out of time — a forgotten crown of hills where cars were banned and the air was thick with history and humidity. But I wasn't here for nostalgia. Not really. I was here because she told me to come, and when Trisha commands, the world tends to obey.

My reflection flickered across the glass
— a pale, gaunt face framed by rain-
speckled hair. The past year had aged
me beyond my years, carving worry lines
into my forehead and turning my usual
dark eyes into something colder, more
distant. The headlines calling me a star
journalist, the exposé that toppled
giants, the government inquiries — all
that noise seemed muffled here,
drowned beneath the monsoon's steady
percussion.

The air inside the train smelled faintly of
wet leather and old newspapers. I closed
my eyes, letting the sounds carry me
backward — to the days before the
scandal, before the sleepless nights,
before the gnawing doubt crept in.
When truth had felt simpler, and my pen
was a sword I wielded without
hesitation.

Then came the call.

Trisha's voice, sharp and urgent, cutting through the static like a lifeline:

“Sameer, come to Matheran. There's something you need to see. Something I can't explain over the phone.”

No explanation, no room for argument. Just a summons.

Now, here I was — stepping off the train into a world that seemed both familiar and alien, swallowed by mist and soaked in rain.

The platform was nearly deserted, save for a lone porter wiping his hands on a ragged cloth, eyes shadowed beneath a wide-brimmed hat. He nodded at me without a word, his gaze lingering just a beat too long, as if he knew the storm I carried within.

I pulled my coat tighter, the damp chill seeping through the fabric and settling in my bones. Ahead, the narrow trail wound its way up the hillside, disappearing into a curtain of green and grey. The air smelled of wet earth and moss, sharp and alive.

With each step, the sounds of the station faded — replaced by the rhythmic splash of my boots in the mud and the distant roll of thunder.

Matheran was waiting...

The path was uneven; roots slick and tangled beneath my feet. The rain had been relentless all morning, turning the dirt into a slippery mess, and the wind teased the canopy above, shaking down leaves like nervous whispers. I imagined

the forest alive — watching, listening —
as if it held secrets just out of reach.

The steep climb made my lungs burn
and my calves ache, but I welcomed the
pain. Physical exertion felt like a tether
to reality, something solid amidst the
fog in my head. I tried not to think about
why Trisha had called me here. The why,
the what, the who — all questions that
tasted bitter on my tongue but refused
to dissolve.

A rustle to my left made me freeze. I
caught a glimpse of movement — maybe
a monkey or a bird — vanishing into the
undergrowth. Or was it something else?
The lines between memory and
imagination were already fraying.

After nearly an hour, the trail opened up
to a small clearing. At its centre stood
the Monte Rosa Hotel. It was an old
place, too large for the hill it clung to,

with fading white paint peeling off its wooden walls and windows like tired eyes half-closed against the storm.

The hotel had an eerie stillness — as if it were holding its breath, waiting for something.

The front porch sagged under the weight of years, and the sign above the door creaked with every gust of wind: Monte Rosa Hotel — Est. 1887.

I stepped inside, the door groaning on its hinges like a warning. The lobby was dim and smelled of damp wood and forgotten times. No welcome mat, no bells or flowers. Just shadows pooling in the corners, and the faint sound of dripping water somewhere deep within.

A young woman stood behind the reception desk. Her name tag read

“Aarya,” but that was all I learned before she looked away, as if distracted by something unseen. Her eyes were dark pools reflecting the storm outside.

“Welcome to Monte Rosa,” she said quietly, her voice flat but not unkind. “We’ve been expecting you.”

I blinked. Expecting me? That was impossible. Trisha hadn’t mentioned this place by name.

“I have a reservation,” I said. “Sameer Gokhale.”

Aarya nodded, rifling through a stack of papers. She handed me an old-fashioned brass key attached to a ring jingling with others. “Room 213. End of the east wing. Be careful on the stairs. They’ve been known to surprise.”

Her words hung in the air, vague but heavy with unspoken meaning.

I took the key and stepped into the narrow hallway, the floorboards creaking underfoot like ghosts trying to whisper secrets. The walls were covered with faded wallpaper curling at the edges — floral patterns turned mottled and stained by time.

Room 213 was small and spartan. A single window looked out over the dense forest below, where branches reached toward the sky like twisted hands. The rain battered the glass in a relentless rhythm.

I dropped my bag and opened the notebook. The pages inside smelled faintly of old ink and damp paper. I turned to the last entry:

“If one imagines a murder with enough detail..., is it still fiction?”

That line had been written months ago during a sleepless night, ink blurring from tears or rain—I couldn’t remember.

A soft knock at the door startled me. I opened it to find a man standing there, weathered and worn, dressed in a faded army jacket.

“Colonel Raj Malhotra,” he said with a nod. “I’m staying until the storm passes.”

I introduced myself. “Sameer Gokhale. Journalist.”

He gave me a look that could have been suspicion or sympathy. “Journalists cause trouble.”

Before I could respond, the door down the hall creaked open. A woman stepped into the dim light, her eyes red-rimmed, cheeks pale.

“I’m Mira,” she said softly. “I lost someone here. You should know — this hotel has shadows that won’t stay buried.”

Her voice trembled, carrying a weight I couldn’t ignore.

Suddenly, a knock sounded from the lobby below. Aarya’s voice floated up the stairs, “Dinner will be served in the dining hall in an hour.”

Outside, the storm intensified. Thunder rolled like a distant drumbeat, the wind whispering secrets I was not meant to hear.

I sat by the window, watching the rain carve patterns down the glass. The forest beyond was a dark sea of green, alive and watching.

A movement caught my eye. At the far end of the corridor, a door marked 255 stood slightly ajar. That was odd. The hotel catalogue I had seen listed rooms only up to 254.

Curiosity pushed me toward the door. Inside, the room was cluttered and dimly lit — a small study filled with yellowed newspaper clippings pinned to corkboards, faded photographs, and scribbled notes in handwriting that made my blood run cold — my own.

On the wall, a headline stared back:
“Rahul Singh – Missing Person,
Presumed Dead.”

My heart pounded. The name was
familiar. Too familiar.

I heard footsteps behind me. The door
clicked shut.

“Looking for something, Mr. Gokhale?”

Aarya’s voice was soft but edged with
steel.

I turned slowly. Her eyes glinted in the
dim light. “How long has this room been
here?” I asked, voice barely a whisper.

“Longer than you think,” she replied, a shadow crossing her face.

The storm outside broke with a fury, rain lashing the windows and wind howling like a pack of wolves. Inside, the shadows deepened. And I knew this was only the beginning.

Chapter 2

Into the Mist

The rain didn't stop; it only grew louder, as if the monsoon had decided to drown the world in its endless grey sigh. I forced my boots forward on the slippery path from Neral station, every step a small battle against the sucking mud and the clinging mist. The hill embraced me like a ghost I half-remembered — cold, damp, and utterly indifferent.

Trisha's message echoed again in my mind: Take the trail route. Don't talk to anyone. I'll meet you near the cliff cottages. Don't be late.

Her words were more command than request. I understood. The usual routes were off-limits — maybe because the storm had made roads impassable, or maybe because she wanted to keep the truth wrapped in shadows.

The trail wound up through dense, dripping trees whose branches knotted overhead, blotting out the sky and muting the world to a murmur. The scent of wet pine and earth filled my lungs, sharp and bittersweet. Somewhere in the distance, thunder grumbled, a warning low and constant.

Each step was a struggle — the mud clinging, my lungs burning, muscles aching. But I welcomed the pain. It kept me tethered to the present, fighting off the pull of memory and doubt.

I tried to keep my mind clear, but it was no use. Thoughts bled in and out of each other like watercolours blurring on wet paper. The pharma scandal, the nights I spent chasing ghosts on my own mind, the bitter taste of betrayal — all tangled with the rising unease that this trip was something darker than a holiday.

I slowed, hearing voices ahead — low, hushed, barely audible over the rain. I paused, crouching behind a thick trunk.

Three figures stood on a muddy ledge; faces shadowed beneath dripping hats. One was a man, stocky and grizzled, his eyes cold beneath a rain-soaked collar. Another was a woman, clutching a shawl around her shoulders, her expression tense. The third, a younger man, fidgeted nervously, glancing around like he expected to be caught.

I didn't recognize them, but something about their conversation sent a chill down my spine.

"...he shouldn't have come back," the grizzled man said. "Not after what happened last year."

The woman's voice cracked. "But it's been months. We have to know if he's alive."

The younger man shivered. "And if he's not?"

A silence fell between them, heavy and cold.

I forced myself to step forward, catching a twig underfoot. The crack echoed like a gunshot.

They whirled around, eyes wide, suspicion flaring.

"I'm sorry," I said, raising my hands.
"Just passing through."

The grizzled man eyed me for a long moment before nodding reluctantly. “You’re not from here.”

“Not anymore,” I admitted.

He grunted. “You’ll find the Monte Rosa up ahead. But be warned — the place isn’t as empty as it looks.”

I nodded and moved on, heart pounding.

The hotel emerged from the mist like a spectre — its peeling paint and sagging porches cloaked in rain and shadow. The windows were dark, eyes watching, unblinking.

Inside, the lobby was silent except for the drip-drip of water and the low hum

of the storm outside. The air smelled of damp wood and forgotten years.

Aarya was at the desk, her face drawn and pale under the flickering light. She looked up as I entered.

“You made it,” she said softly.

“Yes,” I said. “What’s going on here, Aarya? The hotel feels... different.”

She sighed, glancing toward the stairs. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

In the dining hall, the other guests gathered around a long, worn table. Colonel Raj Malhotra sat at the head, his army jacket soaked and muddy. Mira was there too, eyes distant as she nursed a cup of tea.

New faces emerged from the shadows —
an elderly man with a limp, a woman
whose smile didn't reach her eyes, a
young man constantly glancing at his
watch.

The storm outside hammered the
windows, and the candle flames
flickered, casting long, dancing shadows.

Dinner was sparse — rice, dal, and stale
bread — but no one complained.
Conversation was minimal, hushed.

I tried to catch snippets of talk, but the
words seemed to vanish before I could
hold them.

After the meal, I wandered the halls,
drawn by a restless curiosity.

At the far end, the door marked 255 stood closed this time. I pressed my ear to it but heard only silence.

A whisper of movement behind me made me turn.

It was Aarya again, watching.

“Some doors are better left unopened,” she said.

“Why is room 255 even here?” I asked.

She hesitated. “It’s... complicated. The hotel holds its own history. Sometimes the past refuses to stay buried.”

I looked into her eyes, searching for something — the truth, maybe, or a crack in the facade.

Outside, lightning split the sky,
illuminating the forest in stark white.

That night, sleep was a stranger. The
wind howled, and somewhere in the
distance, a bell tolled — slow, mournful,
and echoing like a heartbeat.

I lay awake, notebook open, pen poised.

If the hill was watching, I wanted it to
see I was ready.

Chapter 3

Shadows and Whispers

The storm had claimed the night entirely. Even with the window shut tight, I could hear the ceaseless rhythm of rain — a relentless tapping that mirrored the pounding in my head. Sleep had fled hours ago, chased away by the restless shadows pooling in every corner of my room. The notebook lay open on the desk, its pages half-filled with scribbles, questions, and fractured thoughts.

The walls of Room 213 seemed to lean inward, suffocating, as if the house itself conspired to trap me within its secrets. The faint glow from the bedside lamp did little to pierce the thick veil of gloom.

My mind wandered back to the faces I'd glimpsed at dinner. Colonel Raj Malhotra's eyes had been cold but weary

— like a man who'd carried burdens too heavy for his shoulders. Mira's haunted gaze lingered in my thoughts; her grief was raw, a wound still fresh beneath a fragile mask. And then there was Aarya — the keeper of the hotel's keys and, perhaps, its darkest truths. Her warnings echoed: "Some doors are better left unopened."

But curiosity gnawed at me like a ravenous beast. The mystery of Room 255 had settled like a stone in my gut.

Unable to resist, I rose from the bed, the cold floor biting at my bare feet. The corridor outside was empty, swallowed by shadows and the soft murmur of the storm. Each step I took seemed magnified, echoing down the hall.

Reaching the door, I hesitated. My hand hovered over the tarnished brass knob. A silent argument flared inside — logic

warned me away, but obsession pushed me forward.

The door creaked open.

Inside, the air was thick with dust and secrets. The faint smell of old paper and mildew clung to the walls. Against one side, a cluttered desk bore faded newspaper clippings pinned to a corkboard, photographs yellowed by time, and scrawled notes in handwriting that chilled me — my own.

A headline caught my eye: “Rahul Singh — Missing Person, Presumed Dead.” The name echoed from a dark corner of my memory. Why did it feel so personal?

As I reached out to touch the photographs, a sudden noise startled me — the soft click of the door shutting behind.

“Looking for something, Mr. Gokhale?”

Aarya’s voice was a whisper, sharp and cold. She stood in the doorway, eyes glinting with something unreadable.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this room?” I asked.

She stepped inside, the faintest trace of a smile curling her lips. “Because some truths are dangerous. And some mysteries need time to unravel.”

Her words settled around me like the dust, heavy and suffocating.

Later, I found myself drawn to the hotel’s lounge; a shadowed room lined with bookshelves and faded portraits.

The rain hammered the windows, and
the flickering candlelight danced across
the faces staring down from oil
paintings.

Colonel Malhotra sat alone in a worn
armchair, staring into the fire's dying
embers.

"Troubled sleep?" I ventured.

He looked up, eyes reflecting flames and
memories. "This place wakes ghosts you
thought were long dead."

His words struck a chord. "Do you
believe the rumours? About the hotel...
the disappearances?"

He sighed. "I believe in what I've seen.
And what I've heard in the dead of
night."

Mira appeared silently, joining us with a haunted smile. “It’s like the hotel breathes its own secrets — swallowing those who wander too close.”

Their stories wove around me — whispers of vanished guests, sudden deaths, and the cold weight of silence that followed.

As the night deepened, my own doubts and fears spiralled. Was I chasing shadows, or had something truly sinister taken root in Monte Rosa?

The line between reality and illusion blurred. Every creak, every whisper seemed charged with meaning. And in the corner of my vision, I thought I glimpsed a figure watching — pale, indistinct, almost translucent.

I blinked.

Nothing.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that
Matheran had already claimed me.

Chapter 4

The Weight of Silence

The morning came wrapped in a heavy grey silence, as if the world itself was holding its breath, waiting for the storm to finally break. I woke with the taste of rain still on my tongue, the memory of last night's restless shadows pressing against my thoughts like a weight I couldn't shake. Sleep had been a fragile guest, slipping away before dawn with the whisper of wind through the cracked windowpane.

I stared up at the ceiling, tracing the fissures in the plaster with tired eyes. The walls of Room 213 seemed to close in, the air stale and thick with secrets. Somewhere beyond the thin hotel walls, the forest stretched endless, soaked and watching.

Rising, I dressed slowly, the chill of the morning creeping under my skin. The

hotel was eerily quiet; its corridors empty except for the distant creak of settling wood and the soft drip of water somewhere out of sight. Even the usual morning bustle was absent — no clatter of dishes, no hurried footsteps. Just silence.

At the reception, Aarya was waiting, her eyes sharper in the dim light. She offered no greeting, only a measured glance that spoke volumes.

“Breakfast is delayed,” she said. “The storm has knocked out power in parts of the town. We’ll manage, but it won’t be the usual.”

I nodded, swallowing the unease that rose in my chest. The hotel itself seemed caught in some invisible snare — a place suspended between time and reality, where shadows lengthened and whispers lingered.

I stepped outside into the damp air, the forest looming close, its leaves heavy with rain. Mist curled like smoke among the trees; the world reduced to shades of green and grey. The scent of wet earth was strong — alive and unyielding.

My footsteps echoed softly on the wooden porch as I made my way to the small garden at the side of the hotel. Here, the wildness of Matheran fought to reclaim its ground, brambles twisting toward the sky and flowers wilting beneath the weight of water.

Lost in thought, I barely noticed the figure approaching until she was close enough to speak.

“Mira,” I said, surprised. “You’re up early.”

She smiled faintly, eyes shadowed and distant. “Some nights don’t let you rest. And some mornings are harder than others.”

We walked together toward the edge of the garden where a narrow trail led into the trees.

“Do you believe the stories?” I asked.
“About the disappearances... the hotel?”

She hesitated, fingers tracing a wet leaf.
“I believe the pain is real. The rest... sometimes stories grow around grief like vines. They twist and strangle until it’s hard to see the truth.”

I studied her face — the fragile hope beneath the sadness, the fierce determination that hid beneath her quiet exterior.

As we spoke, a sudden sound shattered the stillness — the sharp crack of a branch breaking nearby. Both of us froze, eyes darting toward the dense foliage.

From the shadows stepped a man, his coat soaked through, eyes wary.

“Colonel Malhotra,” I greeted. “You’re out early, too.”

He nodded grimly. “Storm drives some to the edge. And some things don’t wait for daylight.”

His gaze flicked toward the forest path, dark and tangled.

“There’s something in these woods,” he said, voice low and urgent. “Something that doesn’t want us to leave.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

Back inside, the day unfolded in fits and starts — power flickering, whispers carried on drafts, the heavy silence pressing in.

In the lobby, Aarya gathered the guests, her tone serious.

“The roads are blocked,” she announced. “The police can’t reach us. Until the storm passes, we’re on our own.”

A collective unease settled over us.

The hotel, once a place of modest refuge,
now felt like a cage — its walls closing
tighter with every passing hour.

That night, as darkness returned with
the storm, I sat by the window, watching
shadows stretch and dissolve in the
flickering candlelight.

And somewhere in the depths of Monte
Rosa, I knew the past was stirring —
waking.

Chapter 5

The Echoes Within

The storm had settled into a steady, unyielding drizzle by morning, a grey curtain draping over the hills and choking the world in silence. The air hung heavy, thick with moisture and the scent of wet earth, but beneath it all was something else — a quiet pressure, like the weight of unsaid words pressing down on the chest.

I woke late, tangled in sheets that smelled faintly of rain and old wood. The notebook was closed on the bedside table, but the thoughts it contained were far from dormant. They clawed at me, whispering in fragments and shadows, daring me to piece them together before they dissolved.

The hotel felt different today — more alive, as if it were breathing slowly, holding secrets beneath its skin. I ran

my fingers along the cracked windowsill, watching droplets race each other down the glass. Outside, the forest loomed, dark and indifferent, its branches swaying gently in the mist.

I dressed quickly and headed downstairs, the wooden floorboards creaking beneath my boots. The lobby was empty except for a single figure — Colonel Raj Malhotra — sitting in the dim corner, his gaze lost in the flames of a small fireplace struggling against the damp chill.

“Morning,” I greeted, stepping closer.

He looked up, his eyes tired but alert. “Sameer. Morning. Sleep caught you this time?”

I forced a dry chuckle. “Only barely.”

He motioned to the empty chair opposite him. “Sit. These walls have ears. Best to keep your voice low.”

We spoke in hushed tones, trading fragments of stories and suspicions. The colonel’s experiences in far-flung corners of the world lent weight to his words. He’d seen shadows that clung to places like a second skin — histories that refused to be buried.

“Monte Rosa has its own ghosts,” he said, voice low. “Not all of them dead.”

The line blurred between fact and folklore. It was impossible to tell which whispers were born from fear and which from truth.

Mira appeared then, carrying two cups of tea. Her presence was a fragile anchor in the shifting haze. She settled beside us quietly, her eyes reflecting a deep sorrow.

“Have you noticed,” she began softly, “how the hotel feels... different when the storm passes? Like it’s waiting for something to return.”

I nodded, the memory of the locked room and its secrets burning behind my eyes.

We fell into a silence that stretched, the crackling fire the only sound. Outside, the rain softened to a gentle patter.

Then, a sudden knock at the front door shattered the stillness. Aarya appeared moments later, her face pale.

“It’s from the roadblock,” she said grimly. “A man... injured. They’re bringing him here.”

The tension thickened, coiling tighter in the dim room. I felt a surge of adrenaline and dread.

As the storm whispered against the windows, I realized Monte Rosa was no longer just a place to wait out the rain. It was a trap — a crucible where the past and present collided, and where the echoes within could no longer be ignored.

Chapter 6

Arrival in the Dark

The door creaked open, letting in a gust of cold, damp air that carried with it the scent of earth and something faintly metallic — blood, perhaps, or rust. The figure who stepped inside was cloaked in mud and shadows, his breath ragged and uneven.

Aarya guided him gently, her face tight with worry. “We’ll get you inside.”

The man’s eyes flickered, haunted and unfocused. His clothes were torn, soaked through, stained with dirt and something darker. He collapsed into a chair near the fireplace, the warmth doing little to chase away the chill clinging to his bones.

“Who is he?” I asked quietly.

“A traveller,” Aarya said, brushing damp hair from his forehead. “Found on the road, injured, barely conscious.”

Colonel Malhotra knelt beside the man, checking his pulse and wounds with practiced efficiency. “We need to keep him stable until the storm passes.”

The stranger’s lips moved, forming words that barely escaped. “Rahul...”

A shiver ran through the room. The name hit me like a slap — the same name from the missing person clippings pinned to the corkboard in room 255.

I caught Mira’s eye, both of us frozen by the implication.

“Rahul Singh?” I asked, voice barely a whisper.

The man’s gaze sharpened for a moment, then dulled again as exhaustion claimed him.

Aarya closed the door behind her, shutting out the storm but not the weight it brought.

That night, the hotel felt different — alive in a way that was both thrilling and terrifying. I sat by the window, notebook open, pen trembling in my hand.

What was real? What was memory?
What was madness?

And in the silence, the shadows whispered, waiting for answers I wasn’t sure I wanted to find.

Chapter 7

Fractures

The first light struggled through the dense canopy, the morning fog still clutching the hills like a shroud. The storm had softened to a steady drizzle, but the weight in the air hadn't lifted. Inside Monte Rosa, the silence was thick, pressing on the walls, curling into corners like a living thing.

I woke with a start, the room cold and still. The weight of last night's arrival — the man found wounded on the road — sat heavy in my chest. Rahul. The name echoed relentlessly, as if the hotel itself whispered it into every shadow. Was it a coincidence, or was the past clawing back with brutal insistence?

I lay back, eyes fixed on the cracked ceiling, tracing the fractures like the fissures spreading in my own mind. The line between reality and nightmare was

thinning, fraying at the edges, and I was losing hold.

The notebook was unopened on the desk, but my thoughts spilled in restless waves. Memories, half-truths, and doubts collided in a cacophony too loud to ignore.

I dressed quickly, the cold biting through the thin fabric of my shirt, and made my way downstairs. The lobby was empty save for Aarya, who stood at the reception desk, eyes fixed on the storm-darkened window.

“Morning,” I said, voice rough.

She didn’t turn immediately. “Sameer. You should rest.”

I swallowed the irritation rising inside me. Rest was a luxury I couldn't afford. "The man from last night — the injured one. Is he awake?"

Aarya's gaze flickered to me. "He's stable. He doesn't talk much, but he knows his name."

Before I could press further, the heavy oak door swung open. Colonel Malhotra entered, his face grim beneath the shadow of the wide-brimmed hat he'd pulled low.

"Breakfast is delayed," he announced. "The roads remain blocked. No word from outside."

He paused, then added, "We're cut off — at least for now."

The atmosphere thickened. The hotel, already a cage, was now a fortress surrounded by rain and mud, and perhaps, secrets far darker than any of us wanted to face.

Mira appeared beside me, carrying a tray with two cups of tea. Her hands trembled slightly.

“We have to be careful,” she whispered. “The hotel’s... restless. And so are the people inside.”

Her eyes darted toward the hallway where the door to room 255 remained shut tight, a silent sentinel guarding its mysteries.

As we sipped the bitter tea, the sound of footsteps echoed from the stairs. The injured man appeared, supported by Aarya’s steady arm. Rahul Singh — or so

I was told — looked pale, but his eyes held a fierce spark beneath the exhaustion.

He stopped in front of me, gaze steady.

“Sameer,” he said hoarsely.

My breath caught. The past and present collided in that name, in that moment. Questions tumbled in my mind, but words failed me.

He gave a weak nod and was guided away to rest.

The day stretched on with a slow, suffocating rhythm. Whispers circled like vultures — fragments of conversations I caught between locked doors and curt nods. Secrets rustled like dry leaves.

That evening, I found myself alone in the library, the soft glow of a single lamp casting long shadows across the rows of dusty books. My fingers traced the spines, searching for answers in the silent witnesses of pages.

A sudden noise made me spin — a book falling from a high shelf, landing with a hollow thud.

I bent down, picking it up. It was a leather-bound journal, worn but intact.

Flipping through its pages, I found entries written in hurried script — accounts of guests, strange events, disappearances, and an obsession with the unseen.

One line froze me cold: “The hotel watches. It waits. The line between life and death blurs here.”

The past wasn’t just alive — it was breathing, watching, waiting to claim the next soul who dared to uncover its truths.

I closed the journal with a shudder.

Outside, the rain began again, tapping a steady rhythm against the window.

And I realized — I wasn’t alone in my fear.

The library’s heavy silence pressed in on me, broken only by the soft, rhythmic tapping of rain against the glass. I sat back in the worn armchair, the leather creaking under my weight, and stared at

the journal's cover, fingers still gripping the worn leather.

The entries inside were a labyrinth of paranoia and obsession. Guests who vanished without a trace. Strange noises echoing in the dead of night. Whispered voices slipping through walls. Shadows that moved when no one was watching. All woven into a tapestry of dread, a history written in fear.

I thought of Rahul — fragile, haunted, a man whose body was broken but whose spirit was far from defeated. Was he a key to unravelling this knot? Or just another pawn in a game I was ill-equipped to play?

Questions churned in my mind, the fog of confusion thickening. What had he seen out there on the road? What nightmare had left him bleeding and gasping in the rain?

Suddenly, the stillness shattered. The heavy oak door swung open, and Aarya entered, her face pale and drawn.

“Sameer,” she said quietly, “there’s something you need to see.”

I followed her through the dim corridors, the echoes of our footsteps swallowed by the hotel’s ancient walls. We stopped before a door on the second floor — the one directly across from Room 255.

Aarya pulled the key from her pocket, hands trembling.

“This was just discovered behind a false panel,” she said, voice barely a whisper.

The door swung open to reveal a narrow passageway, choked with dust and cobwebs. The air was stale and thick with the scent of decay.

We stepped inside, the beam of my flashlight cutting through the darkness. The passage led to a small chamber lined with old crates and trunks, relics of a forgotten time.

Among the debris, I spotted a stack of newspapers, yellowed and brittle. One headline screamed in faded ink: “Disappearance at Monte Rosa — Another Guest Vanishes.”

I knelt to sift through the papers, my fingers trembling as the words leapt from the pages, stories of guests who had entered the hotel but never left.

A chill ran through me. The hotel wasn't just haunted by memories — it was a trap, a living entity feeding on those who crossed its threshold.

As I stood, the beam of light caught movement in the corner — a shadow slipping away, just beyond the edge of vision.

I blinked.

Nothing.

But the hotel's secrets were waking.

And so was I.

The passageway behind the hidden door felt like the lungs of the hotel itself—dark, suffocating, filled with the stale

breath of forgotten secrets. Each step stirred decades of dust, which danced in the beam of my flashlight like tiny spectres. My heart thudded against my ribs, equal parts dread and fascination propelling me forward.

Aarya followed closely, her footsteps hesitant, barely disturbing the silence. She looked pale, drawn, but something in her eyes gleamed—determination, maybe regret.

I bent down and picked up a small, rusted metal box, its lock corroded almost beyond recognition. The very act of touching it seemed to pulse with unspoken stories. Carefully, I pried it open.

Inside were faded photographs, brittle and curling at the edges—portraits of guests, some smiling awkwardly, others staring blankly as if captured in a

moment of fear. I recognized a few names, but one in particular sent a cold wave through me: Rahul Singh.

Why had his face been preserved here?
And what was the significance of these images?

Before I could dwell on it, a distant noise snapped me back—footsteps, soft but deliberate, echoing from the far end of the corridor. I exchanged a glance with Aarya. Neither of us spoke, but the unspoken agreement hung heavy in the stale air: we were not alone.

I swallowed hard, the journal's ominous words flashing in my mind— “The hotel watches. It waits.”

As the footsteps drew closer, I extinguished the flashlight and stepped into the shadowed alcove. The world

narrowed into silence except for the sound of approaching breaths and shuffling feet.

A figure emerged from the gloom—a man, soaked and mud-streaked, his face partially obscured by a hood. For a heartbeat, our eyes met. There was something familiar, almost too familiar, in the intensity of his gaze.

Then he disappeared into the darkness beyond.

I stood frozen, the walls pressing in as if warning me to stay away. But the flame of curiosity burned too fiercely.

Back in the room, the journal and photographs lay scattered like pieces of a broken mirror. Each shard reflected fragments of a truth I wasn't sure I wanted to face.

Matheran was not just a place to escape the storm. It was a crucible of memory, loss, and something far older—something hungry.

As night swallowed the last light, I knew this was only the beginning.

Chapter 8

Between the Lines

The morning light seeped weakly through the curtains, a fragile promise struggling to break through the heavy mist that clung to the hills outside Monte Rosa. Inside, the hotel was silent, but that silence was no comfort. It was the kind of silence that carries weight—like the pause before a storm breaks or the quiet after a scream.

I sat at the small desk in Room 213, the journal open before me. Its pages were like a map of madness, each entry a step deeper into a labyrinth where memory, truth, and illusion twisted into one another.

My fingers traced the faded words: tales of disappearances, sudden deaths, whispered confessions. The handwriting was erratic, frantic—a mirror to the

unravelling minds that had once called this place home.

The line between reporter and participant blurred in my mind. Was I chronicling the hotel's dark history, or was I becoming part of it?

The rain tapped softly against the window, a steady rhythm that matched the pulse in my veins.

A sharp knock pulled me from my thoughts. Aarya stood in the doorway, her expression unreadable.

"Breakfast is ready," she said. "You should come down."

I hesitated, the weight of last night pressing on my chest.

As I walked through the corridors, the hotel felt different in daylight—less menacing, but no less haunted. Faces from the past seemed to watch from every portrait, every faded photograph.

In the dining hall, the guests gathered quietly. The storm had left the roads impassable, and the sense of isolation wrapped around us like a thick fog.

Rahul sat near the fireplace, his eyes distant but alert. Mira joined him, her presence a quiet comfort amid the uncertainty.

Colonel Malhotra approached, his expression grave.

“We need to talk,” he said, voice low but firm.

The group settled into uneasy silence as he began.

“There’s more to this hotel than we know,” he said. “The disappearances aren’t accidents. They’re connected to something... older.”

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in.

“The forest around Monte Rosa is ancient. There are legends—of spirits, of guardians, of things that watch over this land.”

A murmur ran through the room.

“Some believe the hotel sits on a nexus—a crossing point between worlds,” the

colonel continued. “And when the storm traps us here, those boundaries thin.”

I felt a chill despite the warmth of the fire.

“Is this superstition?” I asked, voice steady but sceptical.

“Maybe,” he said. “But we have to consider every possibility.”

Mira spoke then, her voice soft but certain.

“I’ve felt it—the way the hotel watches. It’s like a living thing, hungry for stories, for memories.”

Her eyes met mine, and I saw in them a reflection of my own fears.

The afternoon passed in tense
discussion, theories weaving through the
group like the smoke from the dying fire.

As evening fell, the hotel seemed to hold
its breath.

I retreated to my room; the journal and
photographs spread across the desk.

The line between reality and nightmare
thinned.

And somewhere, just beyond the reach
of light, something waited.

The shadows lengthened as twilight
seeped through the stained-glass
windows, painting the walls with

bruised hues of purple and red. I sat alone in the dim light of Room 213; the journal opens again before me like a doorway to another world — one where time folded and secrets breathed beneath the surface.

The voices from earlier still echoed in my mind — Colonel Malhotra's warnings, Mira's quiet fear, Aarya's unreadable gaze. Each word felt heavy, laden with meaning I was still struggling to grasp.

The photographs lay scattered on the desk, faces staring up at me with vacant eyes. I picked up one in particular — a portrait of a young woman, her smile frozen in time. There was something haunting in the way her eyes seemed to follow me, an unspoken plea trapped behind the glass.

My thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Mira stepped inside, carrying a small bundle wrapped in cloth.

“I thought you might need this,” she said gently, placing it on the table.

Curious, I unwrapped it to reveal a faded locket, its surface scratched and worn. Inside was a tiny, faded photograph — the same woman from the portrait.

“Who is she?” I asked.

Mira hesitated, then whispered, “Anna. She disappeared here years ago.”

The weight of her words settled over me like a shroud.

“We’re all connected,” Mira continued.
“By the stories we carry, the memories
we can’t forget.”

I clasped the locket tightly, feeling the
cold metal bite into my palm.

Outside, the rain had returned,
drumming a steady rhythm against the
glass. The hotel seemed to breathe
around us, alive with the weight of its
past.

That night, sleep eluded me once more. I
lay awake, listening to the distant creaks
and murmurs of Monte Rosa — a
symphony of secrets, whispers, and
shadows.

I knew the answers I sought were buried
deep, tangled in the echoes of those who
came before.

And I was running out of time.

The hours dragged on, the darkness outside thick and impenetrable. The hotel's walls seemed to pulse with a life of their own, breathing in the silence, exhaling shadows. I stared at the locket in my hand, its faded photograph a ghost trapped in metal.

I rose and walked to the window, the glass slick with rain. Beyond, the forest stretched endlessly, shrouded in mist and mystery. The line between reality and dream blurred as the storm whispered its ancient lullaby.

My thoughts raced back to Rahul. His arrival, fragile and haunted, was no accident. Something — or someone — was drawing us deeper into the hotel's web.

The journal's pages called to me;
promising answers wrapped in riddles. I
opened it once more, scanning for clues,
for a thread I could pull.

A passage caught my eye:

“In the darkest hours, when the storm
howls and the veil thins, the past
reaches out. Beware the shadows that
wear familiar faces.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

Suddenly, a soft knock echoed through
the room. My heart leapt.

It was Aarya.

She stepped inside, eyes shadowed.
“There’s something you need to see.”

I followed her down the creaking stairs,
through dim corridors that seemed to
twist and shift with every step.

She led me to the lounge, where the
others were gathered — faces pale, eyes
wide with fear and uncertainty.

In the centre lay a new discovery — a
diary, its pages soaked and smeared, but
the handwriting unmistakable.

It belonged to Anna.

Her last words written in desperate
scrawl:

“They watch. They wait. I fear I am not alone.”

The room fell silent, the weight of her fear settling over us all.

Monte Rosa’s secrets were awakening.

And the night was far from over.

Chapter 9

The Plight of the Memory

I barely remember how I got back to my room. The corridor felt longer than before, as if the hotel had grown a spine overnight, vertebrae clicking beneath the floorboards. The lights overhead flickered like the inside of a dying brain—my own, perhaps. Or the hotels’.

I turned the key with trembling fingers. Inside, my room was dim, untouched. Or so it seemed. The curtains hadn't moved; the sheets still bore the dent of my early-morning panic nap. And yet... something had shifted. A subtle tilt in the air, like someone had exhaled over everything I owned.

I didn't check the mirror. I couldn't. I'd begun to distrust my reflection, the way it lingered a beat longer than it should've, eyes too knowing.

Instead, I sat. On the edge of the bed. On the edge of knowing. The police had found *something*—I didn't know what.

Just that they'd left in a hurry,
muttering, tense. One of them had
looked at me like I'd spoken aloud a
thought I hadn't known I was thinking.

Could they tell I was slipping?

Maybe I'd slept too long. Or maybe I
hadn't slept at all. The lines between
what I remembered and what I
imagined remembering were beginning
to bleed. I checked my phone. Still no
network. Still no messages. Still no
Trisha.

A knock at the door startled me. It
wasn't polite. It wasn't urgent. It was...
expectant.

I hesitated before opening it.

A man I hadn't seen before stood there—
tall, gaunt, sharply dressed in a trench
coat that didn't belong in this monsoon.
His eyes were pale. Not grey, not blue.
Just pale. He didn't introduce himself.
Just stared.

"You're Sameer Gokhale?"

“Yes.”

“You’re a journalist,” he said, not as a question.

“Among other things.”

“I need to ask you a few questions,” he said, stepping in before I could grant permission. His shoes didn’t make a sound. That’s what I remember most.

He pulled a photograph from his coat. Placed it on the table like a calling card.

It was her.

The woman from Room 309. The supposed corpse. Still. Drenched. Hair across her face like seaweed dragged from a dream.

“She didn’t die here,” I said, though I didn’t know how I knew that.

“You’re sure?”

“No,” I replied, because I wasn’t.

He tilted his head. “Then why did you just say it?”

I didn't answer. My mouth was dry. My thoughts had folded themselves into cryptic little origami birds and flown out the window.

"She came here for you," he said. "Didn't she?"

I shook my head. Not in denial, just... to stop the noise.

"How long have you known her?"

"I don't even know who she is," I said. A pause. "Was."

He looked around my room. Studied it like a museum exhibit. The bed, the books, the notes I'd scribbled last night. I wanted to grab them before he could read them. I didn't.

"You wrote about a woman like her," he murmured. "In your columns. That series from three years ago. The one about the disappearing patients. The asylum exposé."

My pulse kicked up. "You read that?"

“I read everything you write, Mr. Gokhale.”

That sentence should’ve felt flattering. It didn’t. It felt like a confession.

He turned to leave, but paused at the threshold. “Room 309 isn’t in our records.”

“What?”

“There is no Room 309. Not on our logs. Not on the floor plans. And no one was checked into that room this weekend.”

He left me with that. Just... left.

And the air grew colder.

I couldn’t sit still after that. I paced the room until the carpet began to wear thin beneath my steps. Checked the corridor. Counted doors.

Room 308.

Room 310.

Nothing in between.

I knocked where 309 should’ve been.

Hollow. Cold. As if behind the wall was only brick and history.

And yet... I *remembered* opening that door.

I *remembered* the smell—metallic, damp.

I *remembered* the scream.

Was I cracking?

No. No. No.

I headed downstairs to the concierge, who looked at me like she'd already told me the answer. Maybe she had.

"There's no 309, sir," she said. "Never was."

"But I—"

"You're not the first one to ask," she added quietly. "Every few years... someone does."

I must've looked pale.

“Storm’s coming,” she said. “Some people feel it in their bones. Some... in their minds.”

Back in my room, I shut the door, locked it twice, dragged the desk in front of it like a child afraid of ghosts. I stared at my reflection in the dark screen of the TV. It didn’t blink when I did.

Then I wrote. Feverishly. Every detail. The woman. The room. The pale-eyed man. The missing number. If I didn’t write it down, I would lose it. If I didn’t record it, I wouldn’t believe myself tomorrow.

But even as I wrote, a voice inside me whispered:

This isn’t a story. This is a repetition.

Of what?

I don’t know.

Not yet.

Chapter 10

The Smell of The Static

You'd think that by the tenth day of mental noise, your mind would numb itself, like an overused instrument—strings slackened, reeds worn thin. But no. If anything, the buzz only grew more melodic, more sly. And by now, I'd stopped distinguishing between imagination and memory. I was merely trying to survive them.

I remember waking up to an unfamiliar smell.

Not the mildew. That had become part of the architecture of my brain now. Not the mouldy carpet or that strange wet-coffee scent in the hallway. This was... sharper. Chemical, almost.

Like ozone.

The kind of smell that clung to the air after lightning. But there had been no thunder.

I sat up with a jolt, expecting my breath to be fogged, expecting the window to be open. But it wasn't. The curtains fluttered slightly though. Not from breeze—from something else. Movement?

My wristwatch read 4:47 AM. I hadn't gone to sleep until well past two. My dreams were a tangle of Trisha's voice and shattered glass, the guest's face melting into my father's, then into mine. I had scratched at my sheets so much in sleep that one of the buttons had come off. I pocketed it absentmindedly.

I wasn't in the mood for metaphors. But metaphors were all I had left.

Outside, the hallway was still and yawning. But the faint scent followed me. Burnt wire, perhaps? A short circuit?

My fingers brushed against the walls as I walked, steadying myself. The wallpaper was tacky with damp, as if it were clinging to me in return. I passed by

Room 217. Still sealed with the yellow ribbon. Still no one watching.

And yet, someone had moved it.

A corner of the ribbon—torn. Not cleanly. Jagged. As if someone had slipped under and ducked back out.

I pressed my palm to the door. Cold. Too cold for this humid dump. I swear I heard something behind it.

Breathing?

Or was it just mine, echoing back?

I didn't knock. Not this time. I just stood there. Staring. Listening.

Suddenly, a sound behind me—
floorboard creak.

I turned.

No one.

And yet...

Back inside my room, I tried to write it off. Tried to convince myself it was my paranoia again. But my notebook—the

one where I'd been jotting cryptic bullet points, half-mad suspicions—was open on a new page.

In someone else's handwriting.

Three words:

"He never checked in."

I stared.

My first instinct was not fear. It was anger. Anger that someone had broken in. Anger that I had let them. Anger at myself for the growing suspicion that maybe I had written that myself... and just forgotten.

But then I noticed the ink.

Not blue. Not black.

Red.

It bled slightly at the edges, as though written with the sort of pen people sign death warrants with. The kind of pen you don't just buy—you inherit.

Was it lipstick? No. Too dry. It was pen. But who used red ink anymore?

I turned the page.

Blank.

The next one.

A single symbol: ∞

Infinity.

I slammed the notebook shut.

"Get a grip," I muttered aloud. Hearing my own voice somehow helped. "Get. A. Grip."

But I was lying to myself. My grip had loosened long ago.

That morning, breakfast was quieter than usual. The dining room had only three occupied tables. The same man from earlier—the one who never smiled—was stirring sugar into his coffee, but never sipping. A couple from Pune—so I'd heard—were whispering in Konkani, heads too close. And the manager, Mr. D'Mello, was wiping already-clean plates with the same stained cloth.

He looked up when I entered. His smile faltered. Then returned.

“Morning, Mr. Gokhale. Sleep well?”

I was tired of lying. “No.”

“Oh.” A beat. “The storm’s dying down. They say by tomorrow, the roads may open.”

I didn’t care about the roads. I wanted answers.

“Did you get the name of the guest who checked into Room 217?” I asked, as casually as I could.

D’Mello blinked.

“Mr. Gokhale, I’ve told you—no one checked in there.”

“You also told me the room was being cleaned.”

“Yes.”

“So it was occupied?”

“No. It was vacant. But our policy is to regularly service all rooms, occupied or not.”

“Even when you’re understaffed and locked in by a landslide?”

He licked his lips. “We believe in maintaining standards.”

It was a lie. Too rehearsed.

I leaned closer. “Then why the ribbon?”

He paused. “Sir?”

I pulled out my phone. Showed him the picture I’d snapped earlier. Room 217. Yellow ribbon. Clear as day.

D’Mello’s face paled.

“We... we don’t use ribbon tape.”

“You’re joking.”

He shook his head slowly, backing away. “If someone sealed that door... it wasn’t us.”

He turned and walked briskly into the kitchen. The door slammed behind him.

I didn't follow. I didn't need to.

Because now I knew—something had happened in that room. And they were covering it up.

Or worse...

I was creating it all.

Back in my room, I locked the door. Double-locked it. Pushed the chair against it. Then sat at the edge of the bed, staring at the notebook again.

He never checked in.

The voice in my head—the rational one—insisted that I had written that line. During a fugue. During one of those lucid nightmares, I called waking.

But another voice—calmer, more convincing—whispered that someone had broken in. Slipped under the door like the mist. Read my thoughts. Written them down before I did.

I needed to talk to Trisha.

My phone had one bar. I called.

Ring.

Ring.

Then, a click.

Her voice.

But it wasn't live. It was a voicemail recording.

"Hi, this is Trisha. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a—"

I hung up.

Waited five minutes. Tried again.

This time, her number was unreachable.

I sent a message anyway.

Something's off. Something is very wrong here. Please call me back.

I stared at the text for a long while before hitting send.

Outside, the clouds churned again. Thunder rolled like distant cannon fire. And somewhere far below the balcony, I heard it—

A scream.

Faint. Guttural.

Or maybe a fox. Maybe a trick of the wind.

I pressed my palms to my temples.
Closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the notebook was
on the floor again.

And the page now said:

"You were never here."

They didn't say it outright, but I could
hear the verdict in their silence.

The storm outside had retreated to a wet
whisper, the hush of a city forgotten by
the sun. But the storm inside the hotel,
inside *me*, refused to ebb. Even as I sat
in the lobby hours after the
confrontation with the manager, I felt
like a ghost in the very building I was
supposedly haunting.

I wasn't even sure if I still had a room.
After accusing the manager of covering

up a murder that may not have happened, I wasn't exactly on the guest-of-the-month list. My bag, I presumed, was still in 304, but the key card no longer worked when I checked. And when I asked at the desk — the receptionist looked at me like I was trying to check in with a gun in my hand.

"Sir, your booking is under review," she said with a thin, nervous smile, as if trying to calm a dog with blood in its mouth.

"Review?"

I was about to argue, to raise my voice, but then I saw her hand under the desk. Either reaching for a panic button or gripping a pepper spray. I stepped back, breath stuttering, and nodded.

No more battles. Not for now. Not when the walls were whispering. Not when I was starting to wonder — truly wonder — if this wasn't just a case of murder. What if it was a case of a *mind*, slowly collapsing under its own weight?

Mine.

I wandered the halls of the hotel, like a rejected character from a novel that forgot its own plot. Floor after floor, corridor after corridor — same yellow wallpaper, same dim lights that flickered like dying stars.

The CCTV cameras followed me. I could feel their gaze like hot pins pricking the back of my neck. I paused near one and stared into it, letting the lens drink in my dishevelled hair, the paranoia in my eyes, the tremble in my fingers.

Let them watch. Maybe they'd see what I couldn't.

But what would they *record*, anyway? A man looking for a corpse no one believed existed? Or someone fraying at the edges of sanity, unravelling like a mystery that doesn't want to be solved?

I passed 206 again. The door was now open.

Open.

No yellow tape. No blood. No body. No sign that a tragedy had ever occupied that space. Just freshly cleaned linen, the mild scent of disinfectant, and a chambermaid humming to herself inside.

I didn't enter. I didn't have to. My gaze locked with hers. She paused mid-humming, and the smile fell off her face like a mask too heavy to hold.

Then — with a quiet, almost imperceptible nod — she closed the door.

I found refuge in the only place that still felt like it belonged to me — the laundry basement. It was warm. And dry. And dark. Three rare comforts in this world of leaks, storms, and too much light on things best left unexamined.

I slid behind a forgotten linen cart and sat there for hours. My knees tucked to my chest, a child in the womb of the

building. I didn't sleep. I just watched the shadows move.

Somewhere around 3 AM, I heard footsteps above. Not quick or panicked — slow, deliberate. And then something else.

A dragging sound.

Not cloth. Not metal.

Something heavier.

I rose, knees creaking, and climbed back to the ground floor. No one was at the reception. No guard. No manager. Just the storm, once again howling outside. And the power was flickering — again.

I followed the dragging sound to the east wing. A part of the hotel still under renovation. The hallway was marked with a simple sign: "Closed for Maintenance." But the tape was torn. A boot print pressed into the dust near the corner.

I followed.

Room 109.

The door was ajar.

I pushed it.

Inside — darkness. But not empty. My eyes adjusted.

There.

A shape on the floor.

Long. Still. Draped in a sheet.

I didn't move closer. I didn't touch it. I didn't need to. My mind filled in the blanks like a puzzle that solves itself — with pieces soaked in dread.

I whispered her name. “**Ritika.**”

No reply.

Only silence.

Then — something shifted in the shadows. A creak. Not from the bed, not from the body. From behind me.

I turned.

Nothing.

But I wasn't alone.

I could feel it — like how your skin
knows the cold before your brain
registers it. Someone was there.

Watching me.

Just like the cameras.

Just like the hotel.

I ran.

Not to the police. Not to the manager.
Not even to my phone — which I had
flung into a drawer hours ago after yet
another failed attempt to call Trisha.

I ran to memory.

Back in Mumbai. Two years ago.

I was covering a string of disappearances near the port. They had all vanished from the same five-block radius. No signs of struggle. No ransom. Just gone.

Then — one by one — they returned.

Alive.

Changed.

They told stories of being in a white room, always lit, no clocks. Time bled into itself. They were fed. Cared for. Watched.

They weren't tortured. They were *observed*.

One of them, a girl named Ira, looked me dead in the eyes when I interviewed her and said: "They didn't hurt us. They just wanted to see what happened to the mind when it had no sense of time."

I'd written the piece. Front page. Big headlines. But no follow-up. No

suspects. The case dissolved into public fatigue. But I had *never* forgotten.

And tonight — in this hotel — I felt like one of them.

The lights never stayed on long enough to tell you the hour. The clocks never worked. The power flickered like a blinking eye. I had stopped checking the time. And now, it was checking *me*.

I returned to my room at dawn.

My key still didn't work, but the door was unlocked.

I entered slowly.

The lights were off. Curtains drawn.

But someone had left something on the desk.

My laptop.

Open.

A single Word document.

Title: "**The Faux Murders – Chapter 1**"

The first sentence?

"I came to Matheran to forget, but memory has claws."

It wasn't a sentence I had typed.

It was one I *remembered*.

Because I had dreamed it last night.

I stared at the screen for minutes.
Maybe hours. I couldn't tell.

Then I laughed.

A loud, long, body-shaking laugh.

And I started typing.

My fingers moved like they had a mind
of their own.

Every tap a confession.

Every paragraph a scream.

I didn't care who read it.

I didn't care if anyone believed me.

I would write it all.

The truth.

Or the delusion.

Whichever made more sense.

Chapter 11

The Echo Chamber

The knock was tentative, almost hesitant, but it shattered the fragile silence like a hammer on glass. I sat frozen, the words on my tongue dissolving into the stale, damp air of my room. I wanted to tell whoever it was to go away — to leave me to my unravelling thoughts and the creeping madness that nibbled at the edges of my sanity — but my body betrayed me. My hand moved on its own accord, pushing the door open just enough to reveal her.

Ritika.

The name was a ripple in a pond I thought had long since dried up. She stood there, drenched and shivering, the soaked shawl clinging to her thin frame. Her eyes were wide, glistening with something I couldn't immediately identify. Fear? Desperation? Or perhaps a haunted knowledge that matched the one eating away at my core.

For a moment, we just stared at each other — two lost souls trapped in the walls of the Monte rosa Hotel, both searching for an anchor in a sea of shadows.

“I saw what you found,” she said softly, voice barely above a whisper. “The room... the notes... the lies.”

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. The storm outside had relented, but inside, the tempest raged with cruel persistence. “What do you want from me?” I asked, voice cracking.

“Truth,” she answered simply. “Before it’s too late.”

The weight of her words pressed against my chest, squeezing out the fragile air I clung to. I wanted to ask more, but fear clenched my tongue.

Ritika stepped inside, the cold water from her soaked shawl dripping onto the worn carpet. I closed the door behind her without a word. The room suddenly felt smaller, heavier, as if her presence

had summoned some unseen gravity. She pulled the damp shawl tighter around her thin shoulders, and for a moment, she looked vulnerable—fragile like a cracked porcelain doll.

“Why didn’t you come earlier?” I asked, my voice barely steady.

She swallowed. “I didn’t know where else to go. The roads are blocked. The storm trapped me here, too.”

Her eyes darted around the room like she expected something to jump out from the shadows. I caught a glimpse of something deeper there—something raw and unresolved. Maybe fear, maybe guilt.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” I admitted. “The room that doesn’t exist. The man who never checked in. The notes in my own handwriting that I don’t remember writing. It’s all slipping through my fingers.”

Ritika nodded slowly, her gaze distant. “I know. I’ve been watching you,

Sameer. You're not the only one tangled in this."

Her words sent a cold shiver down my spine. "What do you mean?"

She hesitated, then whispered, "There are others. People who have been here before you. Who have seen things... things that shouldn't be."

My heart pounded harder. "Like who?"

She looked down, fingers twitching nervously. "Like me."

The air thickened with unspoken stories. I wanted to reach out, to offer some kind of comfort, but I was lost in the labyrinth of my own doubts.

"You're saying you've been trapped in this... this echo chamber?" I asked, voice low.

She looked up, eyes shining with a fierce determination. "Trapped? Maybe. But I'm still fighting."

I swallowed a bitter laugh. Fighting what? The storm? The ghosts? Or the fractures in my own mind?

“We need to piece it together,” she said. “Before it’s too late.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe anything that would anchor me in this swirling madness. But all I could feel was the weight of the unknown pressing in.

Ritika’s presence was a paradox—both a beacon and a warning. She sat across from me, the damp shawl now draped loosely around her arms, as if shedding layers of secrecy with every shiver.

“What exactly have you seen here?” I asked, voice barely a whisper.

She exhaled slowly, steadying herself. “I arrived a few weeks ago, under different circumstances. I came looking for answers, much like you. But the hotel... it doesn’t give up its secrets easily.”

Her eyes darkened, shadows pooling in their depths. “There are things buried

here—memories that don't belong,
people who vanished without a trace.
And then, there are the rooms."

I blinked, recalling the phantom 309.
"Rooms that don't exist."

"Yes," she nodded. "Rooms that exist
only when you look for them. Rooms
that appear to some, vanish to others.
Like mirages. Or traps."

My skin prickled at her words. It was as
if the hotel itself was a living, breathing
entity, playing tricks on the minds of
those foolish enough to stay.

"But why?" I asked. "Why me? Why us?"

She smiled sadly. "Because you see. You
look. You don't just pass through. The
hotel senses that. And it feeds on it."

A chill passed through me. "Feeds on
what?"

"Fear. Doubt. Memories. It's a parasite."

I clenched my fists, resisting the urge to
scream. "Then what do we do? How do
we stop it?"

Ritika's gaze was steady, unwavering.
"We fight back. With truth. With
memories. With each other."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. For
the first time in days, I felt a flicker of
something I hadn't dared call hope.

Chapter 12

Fractured Reflections

The dawn barely pierced the grime-coated windowpanes of Room 304. The storm had finally spent its rage, leaving the world outside slick and shining like a tarnished mirror. But inside me, the tempest was only beginning.

Sleep had abandoned me entirely. Every time I tried to close my eyes, a montage of fractured images assaulted my mind: the dead man's glassy stare, Aarya's enigmatic smile that never quite reached her eyes, Ritika's haunted gaze weighing heavy on my conscience. The hotel was no longer just a place—it had become a living, breathing beast, a fractured mirror that reflected back all my darkest fears and memories warped beyond recognition.

I sank deeper into the peeling chair beside the desk. The notebook lay open in front of me—its pages a chaotic mess of jagged questions, fragmented sentences, and half-formed theories. My

pen hovered, but the words I tried to trap on paper slipped like smoke through my fingers. The more I tried to make sense of it all, the more the chaos thickened, binding itself around my mind like barbed wire.

The faint sound of rain tapping against the window was a reminder that the storm had not quite abandoned me after all. A reminder that even the skies mourned what was happening here.

Then—suddenly—the sharp, shrill ring of the telephone sliced through the heavy silence.

My heart skipped.

The phone hadn't rung for days.

I snatched it up on the second ring, my breath catching.

“Sameer?”

Trisha's voice, fragile and distant, yet unmistakably real.

“Trisha! Where are you? Are you safe?”
My words tumbled out in a rush.

There was a long pause, as if she were measuring what to say.

“I’m safe... for now. But not for long.”

Her voice was a whisper—fragile, like a thread barely holding together.

I gripped the receiver tighter.

“What’s happening? Where are you?”

Silence.

“Trisha?”

The line went dead.

I stared at the phone, a cold dread settling over me like a shroud.

The world outside my window was washed clean by the rain, but inside, the shadows only deepened.

The receiver slipped from my fingers, hitting the desk with a hollow thud that echoed louder than it should have.

Silence reclaimed the room, thicker now, heavier — like it was watching me. Waiting.

I stared out the window, the washed-out light making the hotel's aged facade look even more haunting. The rain had ceased, but the puddles still clung to the cobblestones, reflecting a sky smeared with dirty pastels of dawn.

My mind churned, pulling at every scrap of memory like a desperate diver searching for air.

Trisha's voice lingered in my ears, fragile yet urgent. "Safe... for now. But not for long." What did she mean? What danger was closing in on her? Was it connected to this place, to me, or was it something else entirely — something I was too afraid to face?

I ran my hands through my hair, feeling the sticky sweat from restless nights. My throat was dry, voice hoarse from too much muttering to the empty room. Every instinct screamed to find her — to hold on to the one tether I had left to reality.

But how?

The storm had washed away roads and signals. The hotel's isolation was no longer just physical but psychological — a prison of silence, shadows, and secrets.

I flicked the light on and off, watching it falter with the failing electricity — a blink of uncertainty that mirrored my own faltering grip on sanity.

The notebook lay open again. Pages marked with frantic scrawls and cryptic symbols.

∞

The infinity sign stared back at me, mocking. How much longer could this spiral go on before I shattered completely?

A sudden knock at the door jolted me from my thoughts.

“Sameer,” Ritika's voice, soft but firm.
“We need to talk. Now.”

I swallowed and rose, each step heavy as if dragging chains. Opening the door, I

found her standing there, eyes sharper than before — filled with resolve.

“No more hiding,” she said. “The hotel’s secrets are bleeding into our minds. We have to face them together.”

Her words felt like a challenge, or perhaps a lifeline.

I nodded, suddenly aware that this fight — for truth, for memory, for sanity — was no longer mine alone.

The door clicked shut behind Ritika, sealing us inside the cramped room that had become my refuge—and my prison. I motioned toward the worn armchair by the window, but she remained standing, eyes scanning the peeling wallpaper as if trying to read the secrets embedded in its faded pattern.

I cleared my throat, breaking the silence that had stretched too long.

“We don’t have much time,” she said abruptly, voice low. “There’s something the hotel doesn’t want us to find out.

Something hidden beneath all the lies and vanishings.”

My fingers drummed nervously against the desk. “You’ve been here weeks. What exactly did you see?”

Her gaze locked with mine, unblinking. “Rooms that shift. Faces that appear, then fade. Voices that whisper secrets no one else hears. And people—” she swallowed, “people who lose themselves in the maze.”

Her words hit me like a punch. Wasn’t that exactly what I was becoming? Lost. Adrift. Suspended between reality and nightmare.

“Have you... seen Rahul Singh?” I asked, voice barely audible.

Ritika nodded slowly. “He’s part of it, yes. But not the whole story. He was a symptom, not the disease.”

“Then what is the disease?” I demanded, leaning forward.

She shook her head, eyes haunted. “It’s the hotel itself. A place where memories twist and bleed, where truth is a shifting shadow.”

I swallowed hard, fighting the rising tide of panic. “How do we stop it? How do we escape?”

Her lips curved into a grim smile. “By facing the parts of ourselves we’re most afraid to see. By unmasking the lies we tell ourselves.”

For a moment, the room held only our breaths and the faint creak of the building settling.

I felt the weight of the fight ahead, but for the first time, I wasn’t alone.

The air between us thickened with unspoken fears, the kind that cling like humidity on a monsoon day. Ritika’s eyes didn’t waver; they bore into mine with the intensity of someone who had glimpsed the abyss and refused to blink.

“I want you to remember,” she said softly, stepping closer. “Not just what happened here, but before. Your story with the pharmaceutical scandal. The people you exposed, the truths you chased.”

I recoiled slightly, memories flooding in like a breaking dam. The late nights, the threats veiled in polite warnings, the faces of those who had vanished or worse after my exposé. That chapter of my life felt like a distant battlefield, but maybe the war had never truly ended.

She pulled a crumpled photograph from her pocket and handed it to me. The image was grainy, black and white — a crowd, indistinct faces, but unmistakably me, young and determined, standing in front of a factory with a placard in my hand.

“That day,” Ritika said, “you made enemies who would do anything to silence you. And now, those enemies have found a new playground.”

A shiver ran down my spine. The stakes were higher than I'd imagined.

"Why bring this up now?" I asked, voice hoarse.

"Because this hotel is a trap laid by those who fear the truth. And you're caught in the centre."

Her words struck a chord deep within — the sense that I was no longer just a visitor or a journalist chasing a story. I was a pawn in a game far bigger and far darker than I had understood.

"We need to find the core of this place," Ritika continued. "The heart of the deception."

"And if we don't?" I whispered.

She met my gaze, unwavering. "Then we become part of the story. Just like Rahul Singh."

The gravity of Ritika's words settled over me like a leaden fog. I sank back into the chair, the weight of everything pressing down hard enough to crush. Rahul

Singh—the name echoed through the corridors of my mind, a ghost tethered to this hotel’s twisted reality. Was he a victim or something more? A symbol? A warning?

I ran my hands through my hair, fingers trembling. “How do we find this core? The heart of the deception? This place feels endless... like a labyrinth designed to trap us in circles.”

Ritika’s gaze softened for a moment. “It’s not just the hotel. It’s what the hotel represents. The lies buried beneath layers of silence. You exposed some of them before, in Mumbai. But this... this is different.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper, heavy with meaning. “Here, the walls listen. The floors remember. And the past never lets go.”

I swallowed, feeling the creeping chill of dread slither up my spine. The realization that I wasn’t just chasing a story anymore. I was inside it, tangled in its threads.

“Do you think this is... punishment?” I asked quietly.

“Maybe,” she replied. “Or maybe it’s a reckoning.”

For a long moment, we sat in silence. The hotel groaned around us, settling into its ancient bones, as if breathing with secrets too heavy to keep.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” I confessed.

Ritika’s hand found mine, steady and sure. “None of us are. But we don’t have a choice.”

The clock on the wall ticked loudly, counting down to some unknown moment. The storm may have passed outside, but the storm inside had only just begun.

The room felt colder now, or maybe it was just me. I rubbed my hands together, trying to shake the feeling of paralysis creeping over my limbs. The idea that the hotel was a living trap wasn’t just metaphor anymore—it felt

like a cruel, breathing entity with teeth and claws.

Ritika's steady presence beside me was the only thing anchoring me to reality. Even her calm felt like a fragile lifeline in a sea of doubt.

"We need to map this place," I said, voice barely a whisper. "Not just the physical rooms — but the memories, the... patterns."

She nodded. "The hotel's layout shifts. But the patterns of pain, the echoes of fear — those are constant."

I leaned forward, mind racing. "Maybe that's the key. Finding the constants amid the chaos."

Her eyes flickered, and I saw a spark of hope that I'd almost forgotten was possible.

"Then let's start," she said.

We spent hours piecing together timelines, guest lists, fragments of conversations overheard in hushed

tones. Slowly, a disturbing mosaic emerged — people disappearing, reappearing, memories conflicting and overlapping like twisted reflections in a broken mirror.

But amidst the noise, one fact stood out starkly: no one seemed to have a clear account of Rahul Singh's existence. The man who supposedly died had left no trace in the hotel's records. No check-in. No identification. No luggage.

It was as if he was both everywhere and nowhere.

I rubbed my eyes, exhaustion gnawing at the edges of my concentration. The pile of notes, scribbled timelines, and half-remembered faces was overwhelming. But surrender wasn't an option.

"There's a pattern here," I murmured, tracing a finger along the fragmented timeline on the table. "People who vanished—all connected to the same dates, or weather conditions. Rain, storms... the hotel seems to feed off it."

Ritika leaned in, lips pressed into a thin line. “Exactly. The hotel traps not just bodies, but memories, emotions. It’s like a parasite feeding on pain and fear.”

I felt the weight of those words settling over me like a stone.

“How do we fight something like that?” I asked.

She looked at me, her expression fierce. “By remembering. By refusing to be erased.”

The clock ticked on, relentless and unforgiving. The sun was setting again outside, and the shadows deepened. I realized then the battle wasn’t just against the hotel — it was against the silence, the forgetting, the shadows within myself.

And as the room darkened around us, I knew there was no turning back.

The creeping dusk swallowed the corners of the room, turning every shadow into a potential secret. I pulled the curtain aside to watch the fading

light spill over the hills outside, but my mind was tangled deep within the labyrinth of the hotel's mysteries.

"Why does this place exist like this?" I muttered, mostly to myself. "Why does it need to feed on people's fears?"

Ritika met my gaze, her eyes sharp and unyielding. "Because it's built on lies, Sameer. Lies that have been buried for too long. Lies that refuse to die."

I thought about the pharmaceutical scandal I'd exposed—the lies that had shattered lives, the cover-ups that had stung like poison. Was this hotel some twisted echo of that corruption? A physical manifestation of all the deceit and silence?

My fingers brushed over the notebook again, where I'd started piecing together cryptic clues: the name Rahul Singh, the phantom rooms, the missing guests, the impossible timelines.

"This isn't just a hotel," I said. "It's a prison. For the past. For truth."

Ritika nodded. “And the key is to unlock it before it locks us in forever.”

The air thickened with urgency. The hotel had started to feel less like a building and more like a presence—a force that bent reality, blurred memory, and consumed hope.

“Tomorrow,” I said, voice low but resolute. “Tomorrow, we find the heart of this place. No matter what it takes.”

Ritika smiled faintly, the first real sign of warmth in days. “Together.”

Night had fallen like a curtain, swallowing the last of the twilight. The hotel was quiet, but the silence was heavier than ever—thick with unspoken threats and watchful eyes.

I sat on the edge of my bed, the notebook open but forgotten. My mind replayed every conversation, every shadowed glance, every secret whispered in the darkness. The lines between reality and nightmare blurred further with each passing moment.

A sudden noise—a faint creak from the hallway—made me freeze. I wasn't alone.

The hairs on my neck stood on end as footsteps approached, soft but deliberate.

The door handle turned slowly.

For a split second, I considered hiding, running, forgetting everything. But curiosity won.

The door opened, just enough to reveal a sliver of a figure standing there—shrouded in darkness, indistinct, watching.

I couldn't tell if it was friend or foe.

Then the figure vanished.

The hotel had claimed another secret.

And I was still trapped inside its echo chamber, chasing shadows and whispers that might destroy me.

Chapter 13

Into the Labyrinth

The morning light filtered weakly through the grime-smeared window, casting long, uncertain shadows across the room. I woke with a start, heart pounding like a warning drum in my chest. The figure from last night's doorway haunted my vision, a ghost I couldn't chase away.

Ritika was gone.

The empty sofa where she had slept felt colder than the night before, like a void sucking at the edges of my sanity.

I stood, muscles stiff and trembling, and paced the room. The hotel's silence was oppressive, thick enough to suffocate. Every creak and groan in the walls sounded like a footstep, every flicker of light a signal.

I had promised to find the heart of this place. To unravel the lies buried beneath years of silence and shadows.

But first, I needed to find Ritika.

I searched the room, then the corridor outside, each step heavier than the last. Ritika's absence felt like a hollow wound—an unspoken warning that this place was slipping further out of control. Had she left on her own? Or had the hotel claimed her too?

The air was thick with damp and decay. Faint traces of cigarette smoke and old wood mixed with something colder—something metallic that made my skin crawl. I forced myself forward, each breath shallow and uneven.

Downstairs, the lobby was empty, save for the receptionist who looked up with tired eyes but said nothing. The rain had returned, tapping a relentless rhythm against the stained-glass windows.

I pulled out my notebook, flipping through pages marked with frantic notes and half-remembered names. The patterns were clearer now—

disappearances clustered around storms, deaths tangled with missing timelines, and always Rahul Singh's ghost lurking in the margins.

I traced his name with a trembling finger. Who was he really? A victim? A phantom? Or something worse?

My phone vibrated sharply in my pocket. A message from Trisha.

"Meet me. Urgent. Matheran station. Midnight."

My heart skipped. The storm outside was nothing compared to the tempest I was walking into.

The message burned a hole in my pocket. Midnight. Matheran station. Urgent. Just like that, Trisha yanked me from the edge of this suffocating place and threw me back into the unknown.

I stared out the rain-smeared window. The hotel was a cage tightening its grip, but the outside world was no sanctuary. If Trisha's message was true, if she was

truly in danger, then time was bleeding fast.

I packed my bag with trembling hands, stuffing in the notebook, my pen, and a flashlight that had seen better days. Every creak of the hotel sounded like a warning as I slipped into the drenched streets, the storm's fury now a distant roar behind me.

The journey to Matheran station was a blur of wet shadows and flickering streetlights. My mind raced with questions. Why now? Why the secretive call? What had she found—what had she become?

At the station, the platform was deserted, wrapped in mist that seemed to swallow sound and light. The cold air bit into my skin as I scanned the darkness for any sign of her.

A figure emerged from the fog—slight, familiar. Trisha.

Her eyes were wild, haunted. “Sameer,” she whispered, “you have no idea what’s coming.”

Trisha’s voice was barely more than a breath, yet it carried the weight of a storm.

“You have no idea what’s coming.”

I stepped closer, the mist curling around us like tendrils of some unseen beast. Her eyes darted nervously across the empty platform, as if shadows themselves were chasing her.

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to steady my voice.

She swallowed hard, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders despite the damp heat.

“This place — Matheran — it’s just the beginning. The hotel, the rain, the disappearances — it’s all part of something bigger. Something ancient.”

Her words sent a cold shiver down my spine. I wanted to dismiss it as fear or

exhaustion, but the urgency in her gaze told me otherwise.

“We’re trapped,” she continued.

“Trapped in a cycle of secrets and lies. And if we don’t break free, we’ll become part of it — just like Rahul Singh.”

The name echoed again, a ghost I couldn’t shake.

I felt my hands tremble, not from the chill but from the raw, naked fear rising inside me.

“Why did you call me here? What do you want me to do?”

Trisha looked away, voice cracking. “I found something. Something they don’t want anyone to see.”

Her fingers trembled as she pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket, handing it to me.

I unfolded it carefully. The paper was old, stained, and brittle. Scrawled on it was a map — jagged lines marking unknown paths through the hills, cryptic

symbols, and a single word written in bold:

“Labyrinth.”

My mind raced. A labyrinth. A maze hidden in the mountains. A physical and metaphorical place where truth and terror intertwined.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

She hesitated. “From someone who disappeared a long time ago. Someone who knew the secrets of this place before we did.”

Her words settled like a stone in my gut.

“We have to find it,” I said, voice steady despite the pounding of my heart. “We have to find the labyrinth.”

Trisha nodded, a spark of determination igniting in her eyes.

“But we’re not the only ones searching,” she warned. “They’ll come for us. The ones who built this nightmare.”

A low growl of thunder rumbled across the hills as if the storm itself was echoing the threat.

The labyrinth awaited.

The rain thickened into a steady drizzle, seeping into my clothes and chilling me to the bone, but I barely noticed. The map in my hands felt heavier than paper, more like a stone carved from the weight of forgotten history and whispered secrets.

“Who was this person? The one who gave you the map?” I asked, voice low.

Trisha’s eyes darkened. “A man named Devraj. He was a local guide, vanished without a trace about six months ago. The hotel, the disappearances—it’s all tied to him. He warned me, begged me to leave the place alone.”

“But you didn’t listen,” I said, half accusing, half admiring.

She gave a weak smile, almost bitter.

“I’m too far in now. And I think you are too.”

We fell silent as the distant rumble of thunder rolled through the hills, the landscape blurring in the fog.

“Where exactly is this labyrinth?” I asked, tracing the lines on the map with my finger.

“Hidden deep in the Sahyadri forest,” Trisha said. “Not marked on any official maps. Few know the way, and fewer return once they enter.”

Her words sank into me like cold water. This was no longer a mere investigation or a game of shadows—it was a descent into something primal and dangerous.

“We have to prepare,” I said finally. “We can’t go in blindly.”

Trisha nodded, pulling a small pack from beneath her coat. “I’ve brought what I could—flashlights, ropes, some food. It’s not much, but it’s all we have.”

I felt a surge of determination, tempered by a gnawing dread. The labyrinth wasn’t just a place. It was a crucible. A test.

And somewhere inside, the truth waited—dark, tangled, and unforgiving.

The air was thick with mist as we set off, our footsteps muffled by the damp earth beneath. The forest loomed like a living beast, shadows twisting and writhing among the ancient trees. Every snap of a twig, every rustle of leaves felt amplified—echoing warnings we couldn't afford to ignore.

The map guided us through narrow, tangled paths, over moss-covered stones slick with rain. Trisha's grip tightened around my arm as we descended deeper into the labyrinth's heart, where sunlight dared not reach.

"You feel it too, don't you?" she whispered. "The way the forest watches. Like it's alive."

I nodded, swallowing hard. "Like it's waiting."

Hours blurred together. The labyrinth seemed to shift with every step—paths

disappearing, new ones opening—
disorienting us, testing our resolve.

At one point, I caught a glimpse of
something—just a flicker in the corner of
my eye. A pale figure standing
motionless between the trees. When I
turned, there was nothing but mist.

The hotel's shadow stretched far beyond
its walls. The labyrinth was more than a
place. It was a trap for memories, a
prison for truths buried too deep.

But I was no longer willing to be a
prisoner.

We pressed forward, each step a battle
against exhaustion and creeping dread.
The forest seemed to breathe around us,
alive with whispers that slithered just
beyond hearing. The map's cryptic
symbols offered little guidance—more
like riddles begging to be solved.

At one fork, Trisha stopped abruptly.
Her breath caught.

“Do you hear that?” she whispered.

A faint melody drifted through the trees—an eerie lullaby, fragile and haunting. It was so out of place among the cold dampness that it felt like a siren’s call.

“We shouldn’t follow it,” I warned, but my voice shook.

Her eyes gleamed with something fierce. “We have no choice. It’s the only way forward.”

With a mixture of fear and determination, we stepped toward the sound.

The path narrowed, branches clawing at our faces, the ground uneven and treacherous. The lullaby grew louder, wrapping around us like a veil—seductive and sinister.

Suddenly, the path opened onto a clearing bathed in an unnatural glow. In the centre stood a stone altar, covered in moss and strange carvings that pulsed faintly under our gaze.

I swallowed hard. The labyrinth was no mere forest maze. It was a monument to something old, something dark.

Before I could speak, a shadow detached itself from the trees—a figure cloaked in darkness, face obscured.

“Welcome,” the voice was low, chilling. “You’ve come far, Sameer. But the truth you seek may be the last thing you find.”

The figure stepped forward, the dim light revealing a gaunt face etched with shadows — eyes sharp as daggers, holding centuries of unsaid truths. The cloak rustled softly, as if the forest itself whispered in agreement with this stranger’s presence.

I felt a cold knot twist in my stomach. The air grew thick, heavy with anticipation and the scent of damp earth.

“Who are you?” I demanded, voice cracking with equal parts fear and defiance.

A slow smile curved the stranger's lips, almost mocking.

"A keeper," they said simply. "Of secrets, of pain, of memories best left buried."

Trisha stepped beside me, her hand tightening on my arm like an anchor.

"You don't scare me," I said, though my voice betrayed a flicker of doubt.

The keeper's eyes gleamed cruelly. "Fear is the gateway, Sameer. Without it, the labyrinth loses its hold."

The altar's carvings pulsed again, as if resonating with the tension.

"Why bring us here?" Trisha asked, steady but wary.

"To offer a choice," the keeper replied.

"Walk away, forget everything, return to your empty lives—or step deeper and face the darkness that birthed this place."

My heart thundered in my chest. This was more than a crossroads; it was a test of will, of courage, of sanity.

I glanced at Trisha. Her eyes were steady, fierce. Together, we had come too far to turn back.

“Then we step deeper,” I said, voice firm despite the tremors beneath.

The keeper’s smile faded into something unreadable. “So be it. But remember, every truth uncovered demands a price.”

With that, the figure melted into the shadows, leaving us alone with the altar’s cold stare and the whispering forest.

The labyrinth awaited.

The forest closed in tighter, the shadows swallowing the faint glow of the altar behind us. Every breath I drew tasted like cold iron and ancient secrets, thick with the weight of what had been—and what was yet to come.

Trisha squeezed my hand, grounding me amid the swirling storm of thoughts and fear. We were tethered by something stronger than the darkness around us—shared resolve, fragile hope.

“We can’t afford to hesitate now,” she said quietly. “This place feeds on doubt.”

I nodded, steeling myself against the invisible chill crawling up my spine.

We stepped forward, deeper into the maze of twisted roots and jagged stones. The air grew heavier with every step, as if the labyrinth was exhaling its secrets—some whispered, some screamed.

Time lost meaning. The trees blurred into a relentless procession of shapes, the path fracturing into a thousand confusing directions.

My mind spun with memories: the pharma scandal, the faces of victims, the empty hotel rooms with their unspoken stories. Rahul Singh’s ghostly name echoed louder than ever.

Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath my foot, and I stumbled into darkness.

I landed hard, the breath knocked out of me. Pain lanced through my side, sharp and real.

Trisha's voice was immediate, urgent.
"Sameer! Are you okay?"

I struggled to steady myself, blinking against the gloom. Around me, cold stone walls enclosed a narrow passage—a hidden chamber.

The labyrinth was no longer just a forest. It was a prison with secrets buried deep in its heart.

And I had just fallen through the first trap.

The cold stone pressed against my back, rough and unyielding. The faint drip of water echoed in the shadows, a slow, steady metronome marking time in this underground prison. I pushed myself up, wincing as the pain flared sharp in my ribs.

Trisha's flashlight beam cut through the darkness, trembling but steady. Her face was pale but resolute.

"We need to move," she whispered, voice barely audible over the hollow dripping.

I nodded, swallowing back the sting of fear. The chamber was narrow — ancient bricks, damp and crumbling. The air tasted of mould and forgotten memories.

We crept forward, each step cautious, the walls seeming to close in as if the labyrinth itself was alive, watching, waiting.

Ahead, faint inscriptions shimmered on the stones — cryptic symbols, a language lost to time but heavy with meaning. My fingers traced the rough carvings, and a chill ran down my spine.

“These aren’t just marks,” I murmured.
“They’re warnings.”

Suddenly, the beam caught movement — shadows flickering at the edge of vision, whispers brushing the edges of hearing.

I spun, heart hammering, but saw only darkness.

Trisha grabbed my arm, voice urgent.
“We’re not alone.”

From the gloom, a figure emerged —
gaunt, eyes glowing faintly like embers.
The same keeper from before.

“Welcome to the heart of the labyrinth,”
the figure said, voice low and
reverberating. “Here, truth and madness
dance a perilous waltz. Choose wisely.”

The keeper’s words echoed off the cold
stone walls, lingering like a curse. Truth
and madness—a dance I felt all too
familiar with.

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of
the moment settle into my bones. “What
choice? What are you asking of us?”

The figure’s eyes, glowing faintly, bore
into mine. “To face the shadows within,
or be consumed by them. The labyrinth
reveals what you fear most—and what
you try to hide.”

Trisha tightened her grip on my arm,
grounding me. “We’re not afraid,” she
said, though her voice trembled slightly.

“Bravery is not absence of fear, child,” the keeper replied softly. “It is the will to confront it.”

The walls seemed to pulse, the carvings shifting subtly under the flickering light. I stepped forward, drawn by a mix of dread and desperate hope.

“Show us,” I said.

The keeper extended a hand, and the shadows around us deepened, swirling like smoke. Suddenly, I was pulled into a vision—a tempest of fractured memories, distorted faces, and whispered secrets.

I saw Rahul Singh—not as the dead man, but as a living, breathing figure caught in a web of lies and betrayal. His eyes pleaded for justice, for release.

Then, the vision twisted, revealing fragments of my own past—moments I’d tried to forget, fears I’d buried deep.

I gasped, staggering back. The labyrinth was not just a place; it was a mirror.

Trisha's voice cut through the haze.

"Sameer, remember who you are."

I clenched my fists, forcing myself back to the present.

"We'll face whatever this is," I said, voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

The keeper nodded once, slowly. "Then the path opens. But beware—the deeper you go, the darker it becomes."

Chapter 14

The Descent Continues

The shadows behind us whispered secrets I was no longer sure I wanted to hear. The labyrinth wasn't just a maze of stone and roots—it was a tangle of memories, fears, and truths bleeding into one another like ink in water.

The keeper's words echoed in my mind:
The path opens, but beware—the deeper you go, the darker it becomes.

I swallowed the knot in my throat and took a step forward, feeling the cold stone floor beneath my feet. Trisha stayed close, her presence steady like a beacon in the growing darkness.

Every breath I took seemed heavier, loaded with the weight of what was to come.

Ahead, a narrow passage twisted downward, swallowed by a darkness so complete it felt like the absence of time itself. The faint glow of the altar was gone, replaced by an oppressive silence.

“Ready?” Trisha’s voice was barely a whisper.

I nodded. “No turning back now.”

With one last glance at the surface world we’d left behind, we plunged into the depths.

The air grew colder, thinner. My heartbeat was the only sound I could hear, pounding like a drum in the hollow chamber. The walls seemed to close in, their ancient carvings pressing secrets into my skin.

Time dissolved.

I lost track of how long we walked, the darkness swallowing hours and minutes alike.

And then, faintly at first, I heard it: a low hum, like a song sung by shadows.

Something was waiting.

And it knew we had come.

The hum grew louder, vibrating through the very air, settling deep into my bones.

It wasn't just a sound — it was a summons, an ancient call echoing through the labyrinth's veins. Each note seemed to tug at something buried inside me, a memory half-remembered, a fear barely contained.

Trisha's grip on my arm tightened. Her breath came in shallow bursts, but her eyes burned with fierce determination.

"We're close," she whispered.

"Whatever's here — it's what the hotel has been hiding all along."

The passage opened into a vast cavern, walls dripping with moisture that shimmered faintly in the dim light from our flashlights. The hum coalesced into a deep, resonant chant, as if the very stones were alive and speaking in tongues.

At the centre, an altar stood—rough-hewn, ancient, and pulsing with an eerie light. Symbols I'd seen in nightmares and obscure texts glowed faintly, twisting and turning like serpents across the stone surface.

I stepped forward, heart racing. The air was thick, suffocating, yet I couldn't tear my eyes away.

Suddenly, the chanting stopped. Silence crashed down like a tidal wave, so complete it stole the breath from my lungs.

From the shadows emerged a figure — not the keeper this time, but someone... different. Older. Worn. A man whose eyes held the weight of too many secrets.

“Welcome, Sameer. Trisha,” his voice cracked like dry leaves. “You’ve come far, but the true test begins now.”

The man's eyes held a strange blend of sorrow and warning, as though he carried the weight of every lost soul swallowed by this place. His voice was a rasp, like wind scraping against ancient stone.

“You don't understand what you've stepped into. This labyrinth—it's not merely walls and paths. It's a prison for

truth, and a crucible for those who seek it.”

I swallowed hard, the stale air thick in my lungs. “Then why show us this? Why bring us here?”

He shook his head slowly. “Because the labyrinth chooses. And it chose you.”

Trisha’s eyes narrowed, suspicion and defiance mixing in her gaze. “What do you want from us?”

The man stepped closer, his presence looming. “Survival is not guaranteed. You must face what lies within yourselves—the guilt, the fear, the betrayal. Only then will the labyrinth yield its secrets.”

A heavy silence settled between us, broken only by distant dripping water.

My mind raced, heart pounding against ribs like a caged animal. I thought of Rahul Singh—the ghost that haunted this hotel, the mystery I’d been chasing. Was this labyrinth a manifestation of his torment? Or something darker?

The man gestured toward the altar.
“Place your hands here. Face your
truth.”

Trisha hesitated, then moved forward,
laying her palm on the cold stone. I
followed, feeling an electric chill surge
through my veins.

Visions crashed against my
consciousness—fractured memories,
hidden fears, faces I’d rather forget. The
labyrinth wasn’t just physical. It was
inside me.

I gasped, overwhelmed, but forced
myself to endure.

When I finally looked up, the man was
gone.

Only the oppressive silence remained.

The visions faded, leaving a lingering
ache in my chest and a strange clarity in
my mind. Trisha’s breath was shaky
beside me, but her eyes held a new fire—
something forged in the crucible of that
shared ordeal.

We stood in silence, the weight of the labyrinth pressing down on us like a living thing.

“What now?” I finally asked, voice raw.

Trisha’s gaze drifted toward the altar, where the strange symbols pulsed faintly.

“We keep moving. We have to find the heart — the source of all this,” she said. “Only then will we understand. Only then can we hope to stop whatever’s poisoning this place.”

I nodded, swallowing the fear and doubt. The path ahead was uncertain, dark, and dangerous. But turning back was no longer an option.

As we stepped away from the altar, the cavern seemed to shift — walls breathing, shadows lengthening. The labyrinth was watching, waiting to see if we were worthy.

And somewhere deep inside, I felt a stirring — a fragile spark of hope amid the darkness.

We moved forward cautiously, the air growing colder, each breath a visible mist that dissolved into the darkness. The labyrinth's twisting passages seemed to pulse with a life of their own, the walls whispering in a language just beyond comprehension. I could feel the weight of countless secrets pressing in, like hands clawing at the edges of my mind.

Trisha's flashlight flickered, casting jagged shadows that danced wildly across the stone. Her hand gripped mine briefly—a silent promise that we were in this together, that we wouldn't fall apart now.

Suddenly, the ground beneath us shifted. A low rumble reverberated through the cavern, and dust fell from the ceiling in a gentle cascade. The labyrinth was awakening.

Ahead, a fissure opened in the rock, revealing a narrow staircase spiralling downward into an abyssal darkness.

“This must be the heart,” Trisha
breathed, eyes wide with equal parts fear
and awe.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and
stepped forward, knowing this descent
might cost us everything.

Each step echoed loudly in the
suffocating silence, as if the labyrinth
itself was holding its breath. My
thoughts tangled with memories—Rahul
Singh, the pharma scandal, the shadows
lurking behind every truth I’d
uncovered.

At the bottom, a massive chamber
yawned open—a cathedral of stone,
carved with intricate symbols glowing
faintly with an eerie blue light. The
source of the labyrinth’s power.

In the centre stood a pedestal, upon
which rested an ancient, leather-bound
book, its pages whispering secrets that
seemed to bleed through time.

I reached out, fingers trembling.

And the labyrinth whispered its final challenge.

As my fingers brushed the worn leather cover, a shiver shot through me—part dread, part recognition. The book was alive in some way, humming with an energy that felt both ancient and malevolent. The symbols on the pedestal seemed to pulse in time with my heartbeat, a rhythm both hypnotic and threatening.

Trisha's breath was barely a whisper behind me. "Are you sure about this?"

I hesitated, torn between curiosity and the instinct to flee. But I knew, deep down, that this was the moment we'd been hurtling toward—a crossroads where truth and madness intertwined.

With a slow, deliberate motion, I opened the book.

The pages inside were fragile, yellowed with age, covered in spidery script that twisted and turned like living vines. Images flickered—faces, places,

symbols—all blending into a tapestry of hidden history and dark rituals.

As I read, the chamber seemed to close in, the air thickening until every breath was a struggle. The labyrinth was no longer just a place—it was a legacy of pain and power, a shadow that stretched across time.

A voice echoed in my mind, soft and insistent.

“Truth is a double-edged sword, Sameer. Are you ready to wield it?”

I swallowed, the weight of that question settling like a stone in my gut.

Before I could answer, a sudden crack split the silence—the cavern trembled, dust raining from the ceiling. The labyrinth was shifting again, reacting to the revelation.

“We have to move,” Trisha urged.
“Whatever that book holds, it’s not meant to stay here.”

With the book carefully tucked away, we turned toward the spiralling staircase, the labyrinth's darkness closing in behind us.

The real test was only beginning.

The stairwell spiralled endlessly downward, the cold stone walls slick with moisture. Every step echoed like a countdown — a reminder that time was slipping away, or maybe that we were spiralling into something irreversible.

I could feel Trisha's presence beside me, steady and real, the only tether to sanity in a place that seemed to unravel it.

"The labyrinth isn't just a place," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the drip of water and the distant rumble. "It's a test of everything we carry inside — fear, guilt, hope."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. This journey wasn't just about solving a mystery — it was about facing ourselves.

A sudden flicker of movement caught my eye — shadows shifting in the darkness ahead. I tensed, every nerve alert.

“Did you see that?” I asked.

Trisha nodded grimly. “We’re not alone down here.”

The air grew heavier, charged with an almost electric tension. Every corner seemed to hold a secret, every shadow a potential threat.

Then, ahead in the gloom, a faint light pulsed — a soft, otherworldly glow. It beckoned us forward like a siren’s call.

As we approached, the glow coalesced into a swirling portal of mist, hovering just above the ground.

“This is it,” I breathed. “The heart of the labyrinth.”

Trisha’s hand found mine, and for a moment, the fear receded, replaced by a fierce determination.

Together, we stepped into the unknown.

The moment we crossed the threshold, the air shifted—thickened, almost tangible, like we had stepped beneath the surface of a forgotten ocean. The mist swirled around us, cool and damp, whispering unintelligible words that seemed to reach into my mind and stir old fears buried long ago.

The ground beneath our feet was no longer solid stone but something softer, almost alive—pulsing faintly, as if the labyrinth itself breathed beneath us.

Trisha's grip on my hand tightened. "Stay close," she whispered.

Shapes began to form within the mist—faces, twisted and blurred, flickering at the edge of vision. Whispers rose into a chorus, dissonant and haunting, echoing the secrets I'd chased for so long.

Suddenly, a figure emerged—tall, cloaked in shadows, but unmistakably human. The eyes, cold and infinite, locked onto mine.

“You who seek the truth,” the voice was both a whisper and a roar, “are you prepared to pay the price?”

My heart thundered in my chest, but I found my voice. “I am.”

The labyrinth held its breath, and time seemed to stop.

Then, the figure raised a hand, and the mist parted to reveal a path—a path that promised answers but also demanded sacrifice.

I glanced at Trisha. Her eyes said what words couldn’t.

We stepped forward, into the unknown.

The path stretched ahead like a ribbon of shadows, winding deeper into the labyrinth’s core. Each step seemed to echo with a thousand whispered warnings, but we pressed on, drawn by the promise of truth and the need for closure.

The cloaked figure followed silently, a silent sentinel in the mist. I could feel its

gaze burning into my back, a constant reminder that nothing here was without consequence.

The walls began to shimmer, revealing fragments of memories not my own — scenes of pain, loss, and betrayal that transcended time. Faces blurred into one another, some familiar, others grotesquely distorted.

I reached out instinctively, and the images coalesced into a single vision: Rahul Singh, alive and desperate, trapped in a web of conspiracy far darker than I had imagined.

Trisha gasped beside me. “It’s not just a murder... it’s something much bigger.”

I nodded grimly. “And we’re caught in the middle.”

The labyrinth twisted again, forcing us down a narrow stairway that spiralled into darkness. At the bottom, a chamber opened—a sanctum lined with ancient symbols and artifacts that whispered of forgotten power.

In the centre, a glass case held a small, intricate device — a relic of technology and magic intertwined.

The cloaked figure finally spoke. “This is the heart of the mystery. The key to what you seek — but also the source of the labyrinth’s curse.”

I stepped forward, every instinct screaming warning, but the hunger for answers pushed me onward.

As my fingers brushed the case, the room trembled, and the shadows surged — threatening to swallow us whole.

The tremor ran through the chamber, the very air vibrating with an unseen force. My heart pounded, adrenaline spiking as shadows writhed along the walls like living things, reaching out with spectral fingers.

Trisha grasped my arm, her grip fierce. “Sameer, we need to be careful. This isn’t just a puzzle — it’s a trap.”

The glass case shimmered, glowing faintly as if responding to our presence.

I hesitated, torn between fear and the burning need to uncover the truth.

Slowly, I pressed a hand against the surface.

A surge of images flooded my mind—fragments of conversations, dark experiments, whispered betrayals. The device wasn't merely a relic; it was a symbol of power abused, a catalyst for the poison seeping through the hotel and beyond.

Suddenly, a cold wind howled through the chamber, extinguishing our lights. Darkness swallowed us whole.

In the void, I heard a voice—low, urgent, laced with despair.

“You sought the truth... but truth demands sacrifice.”

A flash of light blinded me, and when my vision cleared, the labyrinth had changed. The path back was gone.

We were trapped.

The darkness pressed in on all sides, thick and suffocating. I could hear Trisha's breathing, shallow and quick, just inches from me — the only reminder that we were still alive, still here, still fighting.

Then, faintly, a dim glow appeared ahead, like a dying ember struggling against the void. We stumbled toward it, the cold stone floor slick beneath our feet.

As the light grew stronger, the chamber revealed itself: walls carved with symbols that writhed and twisted like serpents, eyes seeming to watch us from every shadow.

At the centre stood a mirror — ornate, ancient, and unsettling. Its surface rippled like water, reflecting not our faces but something else entirely.

I stepped closer, heart pounding. The reflection shifted, revealing scenes from my own past — memories I had buried deep: failures, betrayals, and fears.

Trisha's voice trembled behind me. "It's showing us who we really are."

I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to look away. The labyrinth was demanding more than courage — it wanted reckoning.

The mirror shimmered, and the air grew cold.

A whisper curled around me, barely audible but unmistakable: "Face yourself, or be lost forever."

I stood frozen before the mirror, the rippling surface drawing me in like a dark pool of memories and regrets. The images were sharp, vivid—a gallery of my own failures and fears laid bare for judgment. Faces I'd turned away from, moments I'd tried to forget, mistakes that haunted every corner of my mind.

Rahul Singh's face flickered among them; a silent accusation etched in sorrow and pain. The pharmaceutical scandal, the relentless pursuit of truth that had cost me more than I wanted to

admit—it all converged here, in this cold, ancient place.

Trisha's breath was a fragile presence behind me, her own reflection fragmented and wavering. "We can't run from this," she said softly. "The labyrinth wants us to see everything—to understand."

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of those words settle deep inside. This was more than a maze of stone; it was a crucible, forging who we truly were.

The mirror shimmered violently, and suddenly, I was no longer just a spectator—I was inside the reflection, trapped in a swirling storm of memories and emotions.

Darkness closed in, but beneath it, a spark—fragile but real. Hope.

I reached for it, grasping with everything I had.

"Face yourself," the whisper returned, but this time, it carried something new—a challenge, yes, but also a promise.

To survive the labyrinth, I had to confront not only its mysteries but the shadows within my own soul.

And for the first time, I was ready.

The swirling storm inside the mirror pulled me deeper, memories folding over themselves like waves crashing relentlessly against the cliffs of my mind. Every face, every failure, every betrayal I had tried to bury was laid bare — raw, unfiltered, impossible to ignore.

But beneath the chaos, something else stirred. A fragile ember glowing steadily amid the darkness: resilience.

I clenched my fists, grounding myself in that spark. This was no longer about running from the past or hiding from the truth. It was about standing tall, embracing the pain, and finding strength in the fractures.

Trisha's voice cut through the storm, steady and unwavering. "You're not alone, Sameer. We face this together."

Her presence was a lifeline, a beacon
amid the storm of doubt threatening to
consume me.

The mirror began to calm, the tempest
subsiding into stillness. Slowly, the
ripples stilled, and the surface cleared —
reflecting not the broken memories but
two faces, determined and unyielding.

The labyrinth shifted once more, the
oppressive weight lifting as if
acknowledging our resolve.

Ahead, a doorway appeared — carved
from living stone, glowing faintly with
an otherworldly light.

“This is it,” I breathed. “The truth.”

Together, we stepped forward, ready to
face whatever awaited.

Chapter 15

The Heart of the Darkness

The doorway loomed ahead, glowing with a faint, ethereal light that seemed both inviting and threatening. The air around it pulsed with an energy that sent a shiver down my spine—part anticipation, part dread.

Trisha took a deep breath and whispered, “This is what we’ve been searching for.”

I swallowed, the weight of everything pressing down harder than ever before—the pharma scandal, Rahul Singh’s ghost, the endless nights filled with doubt and questions. All led here. To this moment.

The door was not made of wood or metal but seemed carved from the very stone itself, alive with ancient runes that flickered and danced like fireflies. When I reached out to touch it, a surge of power coursed through me, like the

labyrinth was acknowledging me as more than just a trespasser.

With a steady hand, I pushed the door open.

Inside was a chamber unlike any I'd ever seen. The walls were lined with countless relics—old photographs, newspaper clippings, torn journal pages, all swirling in a suspended haze, as if frozen in time. At the centre stood a pedestal, and atop it lay a single object: a tarnished locket, its surface etched with symbols that seemed eerily familiar.

As I stepped forward, the room seemed to close in, the whispers returning in a flood—fragments of conversations, promises broken, lies told in the shadows.

Trisha's voice broke through my spiralling thoughts. "Sameer, look..."

She pointed to a faded photograph pinned on the wall—a picture of Rahul Singh, but not alone. Behind him stood

someone unmistakable, someone whose face sent a jolt through me.

The truth was tangled deeper than I'd imagined.

The photograph hung crooked, pinned beneath a faded headline: "Pharma Whistleblower Vanishes Mysteriously." Rahul Singh's determined face stared out, but behind him was a shadow I couldn't ignore—Aarya.

My breath caught. Aarya—the hotel manager, the woman who looked so much like Trisha, who had been so guarded, so elusive. Why was she in that photo? What was her connection to Rahul?

Trisha's eyes met mine, wide with disbelief. "She's been hiding something, Sameer. All this time."

I stepped closer, tracing the edges of the photo with trembling fingers. It was more than just a connection—it was a link to everything: the pharmaceutical

scandal, the ghostly presence in the hotel, the labyrinth itself.

The whispers grew louder, swirling around us like a storm. Pieces clicked into place in my mind, but with every answer came more questions.

Why had Rahul checked into a room that didn't exist? Why did the hotel catalogue have no record of him? And what role did Aarya play in this deadly game?

I felt the old familiar pull—the intoxicating mix of fear and obsession that had driven me into this nightmare.

“Trisha,” I said, voice tight, “we’re closer than ever. But we’re also deeper into danger.”

Her hand found mine, steady and warm. “Then we face it together.”

The locket on the pedestal caught my eye again—its symbols shimmering like a heartbeat. I reached out, fingers brushing the cold metal, and a jolt shot through me.

Images exploded behind my eyelids:
whispered conversations in dark rooms,
a hand passing something small and
deadly, the silent scream of betrayal.

I blinked, gasping for breath.

The heart of darkness had revealed
itself. And it was more personal than I
could have imagined.

The locket was cold in my hand, heavier
than metal should be—as if it carried the
weight of all the secrets it concealed. I
stared at the intricate symbols, trying to
decode their meaning, but it was like
trying to read a language lost to time.

“Sameer...” Trisha’s voice was cautious.
“Maybe it’s more than just a clue. Maybe
it’s a warning.”

I looked up at her, the storm raging in
my chest. “A warning that someone
wants to keep this buried forever.”

The truth gnawed at me—like a festering
wound I couldn’t ignore. Rahul Singh
wasn’t just a victim; he was a key piece
in a larger conspiracy, something tied to

the labyrinth, the hotel, even the scandal I'd exposed.

And Aarya... her presence in that photo shattered every assumption I'd made. Was she an ally? An enemy? Or both?

A sudden noise made me jump—soft footsteps echoing behind the heavy door. The labyrinth was never silent for long.

Trisha moved quickly, her instincts sharp as ever. "We need to hide."

We slipped into the shadows, hearts pounding. The footsteps grew louder—slow, deliberate, closing in.

A voice drifted through the chamber—a low, familiar tone. "Looking for something?"

My blood ran cold.

The door creaked open, and there she was. Aarya, eyes cold and calculating, the smile on her lips nothing but a mask.

“I wondered how long it would take you,” she said softly, stepping inside like a predator.

The final confrontation was here.

Aarya’s eyes locked onto mine, sharp and unreadable. The soft smile never quite reached them — cold as the stone walls surrounding us. She stepped fully into the room, the door clicking shut behind her with finality.

“So, you’ve found the locket,” she said, voice smooth but edged with something dangerous. “That little trinket has caused more trouble than you can imagine.”

I tightened my grip around it, feeling the pulse of hidden stories vibrating through the metal. “Why, Aarya? Why hide the truth about Rahul? About the labyrinth?”

Her smile flickered, just for a moment, before settling back into something almost cruel.

“Rahul was never just a guest. He was part of a bigger game — a pawn caught between forces he didn’t understand. The pharmaceutical scandal you exposed? Just the surface. The real darkness runs deeper, beneath this hotel, beneath Matheran itself.”

Trisha stepped forward, eyes blazing. “What do you mean? What are you hiding?”

Aarya’s gaze flicked to her, then back to me. “This hotel was built to guard secrets—ancient power, knowledge that could topple governments, destroy lives. Rahul stumbled on something he shouldn’t have. And for that, he paid the ultimate price.”

My mind reeled, the pieces of the puzzle clashing violently. “You knew this. You were protecting it.”

She nodded slowly, her expression unreadable. “I am its keeper. And if you want to leave here alive, you’ll need to understand the cost.”

The room seemed to darken, shadows lengthening like claws reaching for us.

The labyrinth's true test wasn't just about uncovering secrets. It was about surviving them.

The air between us crackled, thick with unspoken threats and buried truths. Aarya's eyes bore into mine, cold and relentless, like a judge weighing my soul.

"So, you want to know the cost?" she asked, voice low, almost a whisper. "It's not just lives lost, Sameer. It's everything you hold dear. The very fabric of reality can unravel if the wrong hands get this knowledge."

I tightened my grip on the locket, the metal cool but burning with latent power. "Then why tell me? Why warn me now?"

A slow, almost sad smile curved her lips. "Because the labyrinth has chosen you. You can't walk away—not now. You need to decide: protect the secret, or become part of its curse."

Trisha's hand found mine, a silent anchor amid the storm. "We don't run from the truth," she said firmly.

Aarya studied us, then nodded, almost approvingly. "Brave, but foolish."

Suddenly, the ground trembled. Dust fell from the ceiling as a low rumble echoed through the chamber.

"The labyrinth doesn't give up its secrets easily," Aarya said, voice tense. "Prepare yourselves."

The walls began to shift, the room twisting and folding like a living thing. Shadows lengthened, reaching out like claws.

Trisha and I exchanged a look—no words needed. Whatever came next, we faced it together.

The chamber convulsed, the stone walls twisting and warping as if the labyrinth itself breathed. The ancient symbols glowed brighter, their eerie light casting flickering shadows that crawled like living creatures.

A low, guttural growl filled the air—a sound not entirely of this world. The ground beneath us vibrated with a primal force, sending tremors through my bones.

Trisha tightened her grip on my hand, eyes wide with a mixture of fear and fierce determination.

“We have to keep moving,” she urged. “This place... it’s trying to trap us.”

Aarya’s silhouette blended with the shifting shadows, her calm demeanour now a stark contrast to the chaos erupting around us.

Suddenly, the floor beneath the pedestal cracked open, revealing a yawning abyss. From its depths, a cold mist billowed upward, swirling around our feet like spectral fingers reaching for us.

I swallowed hard, heart hammering.

“Step forward,” Aarya commanded softly, “or be consumed by the darkness.”

Every instinct screamed to run, but I forced myself to take a step toward the abyss, Trisha at my side.

The mist curled around us, whispering secrets I could barely comprehend—promises of power, warnings of doom.

As we crossed the threshold, the labyrinth's true test began.

The mist swallowed us whole, cold and suffocating, seeping into every pore like a silent poison. The air was thick with whispers—snatches of voices from nowhere and everywhere, murmurs of secrets best left buried.

I struggled to focus, gripping Trisha's hand as if it were the only thing anchoring me to reality. Her eyes, fierce and steady, were the only light cutting through the oppressive gloom.

"We can't let it get inside our heads," she said, voice strained but determined.

But the labyrinth was relentless. Shadows flickered at the edge of my vision—faces twisted in torment,

memories distorted by fear and doubt. Each step felt like walking through a waking nightmare, a test of mind and soul.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the mist—a reflection of myself, but twisted, hollow-eyed, a spectre of the man I feared becoming.

It spoke without moving lips: “You seek the truth, but are you ready to lose yourself?”

I stared, heart hammering. This was the labyrinth’s final gauntlet—a confrontation with my own demons.

“No,” I whispered. “I won’t be lost.”

With a surge of will, I stepped forward, breaking the spectre’s hold. The mist swirled violently, then began to dissipate, the oppressive weight lifting like a tide retreating.

Ahead, the labyrinth opened into a vast chamber, bathed in a cold, blue light. At its centre lay the final secret—the key to everything.

Trisha squeezed my hand. “We made it.”

But the journey was far from over.

The chamber before us was vast—its walls adorned with ancient carvings that glowed faintly in the blue light, like constellations mapping out a forgotten cosmos. The air was thick with the scent of damp stone and something metallic, sharp and cold.

At the centre rested a pedestal, upon which lay an ancient manuscript bound in cracked leather. The title was barely legible, but the weight it carried was unmistakable: this was the key.

I stepped forward cautiously, feeling the immense gravity of the moment press upon me. Every story I’d chased, every danger faced, all led here.

Trisha’s eyes searched mine. “Are you ready?”

I nodded, swallowing down the knot of fear and doubt. “I have to be.”

As my fingers brushed the cover, a sudden surge of energy shot through me, as if the labyrinth itself was acknowledging my arrival. The room seemed to pulse, alive with power and purpose.

Opening the manuscript, I found pages filled with cryptic symbols, diagrams, and fragmented accounts—pieces of a puzzle spanning centuries. The text spoke of a secret cabal, of betrayals woven into history, and a truth so dangerous it had been locked away beneath the very ground we stood on.

My breath caught as I realized the stakes. This wasn't just a story about a murder or a scandal—it was a revelation that could shake the foundations of everything.

Trisha's voice was steady beside me. "We need to get this out. The world deserves to know."

But I hesitated. Was the world ready? Could it bear the truth?

The labyrinth had tested us, stripped us bare, and now demanded a choice.

To reveal the darkness, or let it remain hidden forever.

The manuscript felt heavier than it should have—as though it carried not just words, but the weight of countless lives, hopes, and broken dreams trapped within its brittle pages. My fingers trembled as I traced the cryptic symbols, the faded ink whispering secrets I could barely comprehend.

I wanted to scream, to shout the truth from the rooftops. The world *had* to know what shadowy forces lurked beneath the surface of power and progress. The truth about Rahul, the pharmaceutical scandal, the labyrinth's ancient curse—it was all intertwined in a web so tangled that pulling one thread might unravel everything.

But the cold voice of doubt gnawed at me. What if the truth was too much? What if revealing it tore apart families, shattered reputations, destroyed lives?

I looked at Trisha. Her eyes burned with fierce conviction—unyielding, unwavering. “We have to expose this,” she said simply, as if no alternative existed.

And yet, I hesitated. Because I knew better than anyone that truth was a double-edged sword. It could liberate or destroy. It could bring justice—or chaos.

The labyrinth had been a mirror, forcing me to confront not just the external mystery, but the shadows within myself—the fears, the regrets, the guilt I carried like scars beneath my skin.

Could I carry this truth without breaking?

The weight was crushing.

I closed the manuscript slowly, the decision crystallizing in my mind.

“We’ll reveal it,” I said finally, voice steady despite the storm raging inside. “But we do it carefully. Methodically. We make sure the world is ready.”

Trisha nodded, a faint smile breaking through the tension. “Together.”

In that moment, the labyrinth seemed to exhale—its ancient power acknowledging our resolve.

But as we turned to leave, a new sound froze us in place—a slow, deliberate clap echoing through the chamber.

From the shadows stepped a figure—silent, imposing.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” the voice said, low and menacing.

The true final test had only just begun.

his slow clap echoed around the chamber, each strike like a tolling bell marking my descent into deeper chaos. My pulse surged, muscles tensing as I scanned the shadows. The figure stepped forward, revealing a face carved in stone — cold, unreadable, yet burning with intent.

“So predictable,” the voice hissed. “You think you can unravel the labyrinth’s secrets and walk away unscathed?”

I swallowed hard, steadying my breath. “Who are you?”

A shadow flickered in the figure’s eyes, a dangerous smile curling lips that had long known deception. “Call me the Custodian. I am the guardian of what you seek. The balance keeper.”

Trisha’s grip on my arm tightened, grounding me as the Custodian’s gaze bored into mine. “You don’t scare me,” she said firmly, voice steely.

The Custodian chuckled darkly. “Brave words. But bravery alone won’t save you.”

With a flick of his wrist, the chamber shifted violently. The walls closed in, the carvings glowing with renewed fury. The manuscript slipped from my hands, landing open on the stone floor, pages fluttering like trapped birds.

“You will choose,” the Custodian intoned. “Keep the secret sealed or let chaos reign. But know this — every choice has a price.”

I felt the weight of centuries pressing down, the labyrinth’s curse weaving itself around us. Time slowed, heartbeats thundered, and the line between hunter and hunted blurred.

Trisha met my gaze, fierce and unwavering. “Whatever comes, we face it together.”

I nodded, determination steeling my spine.

This was no longer just a story. It was a reckoning.

The chamber shuddered, the walls breathing with a life of their own — ancient stone grinding against stone as the labyrinth closed ranks around us. The Custodian’s presence was a shadow looming larger than his form, a spectre of judgment and fate.

I swallowed hard, feeling the gravity of the moment settle deep in my bones. This was no longer a puzzle to solve or a mystery to expose. It was a crucible, a test of everything I was made of.

“Choose,” the Custodian repeated, voice echoing like thunder in the cavernous room. “Reveal the truth and watch as the world burns in chaos. Or bury it forever and live with the chains of silence.”

Trisha’s hand found mine, fingers tightening in a fierce grip. “We don’t get to choose silence,” she whispered.

I met her eyes and saw the fire that had carried us through every dark corridor and sleepless night. The fire that refused to be snuffed out.

I stepped forward, voice steady despite the storm raging inside me. “The truth will be told. Carefully, deliberately. But it *will* be told.”

The Custodian’s smile was thin and bitter. “So be it. Then face the labyrinth’s final reckoning.”

Suddenly, the ground beneath us cracked open, revealing a swirling vortex of shadow and light — a portal between worlds, between realities.

A surge of cold fear washed over me, but I held onto Trisha's hand, our anchor amid the madness.

The labyrinth demanded one last sacrifice.

One last choice.

Together, we stepped toward the unknown.

The vortex swirled with a hypnotic rhythm — light and shadow weaving together in a chaotic dance, pulling at the edges of my very soul. I felt like I stood at the precipice of two worlds: one grounded in harsh reality, the other a shifting nightmare of secrets and lies.

Trisha's grip on my hand was ironclad. "We step through together," she said firmly. "No turning back."

I swallowed hard, a cold knot tightening in my gut. Fear clawed at me — the fear of the unknown, the fear of losing everything I thought I was. But beneath it all was something stronger: resolve.

With a steady breath, I stepped forward. The air grew thick, as if the labyrinth itself was holding its breath. Then, the world flipped.

Light exploded around us, searing and blinding. The ground vanished beneath our feet, replaced by a void swirling with echoes—voices of those lost, cries of betrayals, murmurs of redemption.

And then, silence.

We landed hard on cold stone, the vortex snapping shut behind us like a trap.

The chamber we entered was stark, a cathedral of emptiness. At its centre stood a solitary figure — cloaked, hooded, and unmistakably real.

“Welcome to the truth’s edge,” the figure intoned.

A silence settled between us, thick and suffocating.

I clenched my fists. “Show me.”

Because the labyrinth had given me a choice. And now, it was time to face the consequences.

Chapter 16

The Truth's Edge

The hooded figure's voice was low, reverberating in the empty chamber like a summons from the abyss. "You stand at the threshold, Sameer. The truth you seek is not just a story — it is a reckoning."

I struggled to steady my breath, every nerve screaming with anticipation and dread. This was what I had chased relentlessly, yet now that it was here, the weight threatened to crush me.

"Tell me," I demanded, voice raw, "what am I supposed to see? What lies beneath the lies?"

The figure reached forward, pulling back the hood — revealing a face both haunting and familiar.

It was Rahul Singh.

Not the victim I had imagined, but something else — a living echo, a man

caught between worlds, trapped by secrets and silence.

“Rahul?” My voice cracked with disbelief.

He smiled, but it was a ghost of a smile, heavy with pain. “I never left this place. The labyrinth keeps us all tethered — the betrayed, the broken, the forgotten.”

My mind reeled as the truth spilled out in fractured whispers — a tale of betrayal, corruption, and ancient pacts sealed in blood.

The pharmaceutical scandal was just the tip of an iceberg that reached into dark chambers of power.

And I, Sameer Gokhale, had stumbled into a game far larger than I’d ever imagined.

Rahul’s eyes held the weight of a thousand sorrows, and as he spoke, his voice trembled with the burden of a truth too heavy to carry alone.

“The scandal you uncovered... it was no accident. It was orchestrated, a curtain hiding what lies beneath. The labyrinth, the hotel — they are guardians of a secret older than memory itself. A secret that could topple empires.”

I swallowed hard, the enormity of his words pressing down on me like a physical weight. “Why show me this? Why now?”

“Because you were chosen,” he said simply. “The labyrinth tests, but it also seeks champions. Those who can bear the truth, and carry it forward.”

The room seemed to close in, shadows flickering like restless spirits. I felt my resolve waver — the temptation to turn back, to forget the nightmare I’d uncovered, clawing at my sanity.

But Trisha’s hand steadied mine, grounding me in reality. “We don’t run from the darkness,” she whispered.

Rahul’s gaze softened. “Then prepare yourself. The path ahead is perilous,

filled with sacrifices you cannot yet imagine. But the light you seek lies in facing the shadows.”

I nodded, the labyrinth’s cold grip loosening just enough to let hope flicker.

Together, we stepped deeper into the heart of truth — uncertain, but unbroken.

The chamber’s silence settled like a heavy fog after Rahul’s words, but inside me, a storm raged. The labyrinth had peeled back layers I never expected to confront—layers of deception, betrayal, and power games that twisted reality itself.

I sank to the cold stone floor, clutching the manuscript still warm in my coat pocket. It was no longer just a document. It was a living testament—a map through the dark corridors of truth and lies.

“Why does it feel like the walls are closing in?” I muttered, more to myself than anyone else.

Trisha crouched beside me, her eyes steady, unwavering. “Because they are. This labyrinth is as much in our minds as it is in these halls. Every secret uncovered tightens the noose.”

I closed my eyes, images flooding me: the pharma scandal, Rahul’s faked death, Aarya’s cryptic warnings, the hotel’s impossible rooms. Every thread wove into a tapestry more chilling than I could have imagined.

“We have to be careful,” I said, voice low. “If this truth leaks the wrong way... it could destroy lives — maybe even us.”

Trisha nodded slowly. “But silence is complicity. The world needs to know.”

Her words were a beacon in the darkness, but the labyrinth’s curse lingered—a reminder that knowledge was a burden, not a blessing.

As I opened my eyes, the chamber’s shadows seemed to shift, almost watching. The final pieces of the puzzle awaited us — but so did the dangers.

With a steadying breath, I stood. “We move forward. Together.”

The labyrinth was far from finished with us.

The cold light of dawn filtered through the hotel’s stained-glass windows, casting fractured rainbows across the worn floorboards. The storm outside had quieted, but inside, my mind was a tempest.

Chapter 17

Labyrinth

Trisha and I sat across from each other at the small, scarred table in my room, the manuscript spread between us like a fragile treaty with fate.

“We can’t just publish everything all at once,” I said, voice rough from exhaustion. “The labyrinth’s secrets... they’re a powder keg. Drop it carelessly, and it’ll explode.”

She nodded, scanning the cryptic pages. “We need allies. People we can trust, who understand the stakes and won’t be silenced.”

“But who?” I asked, frustration and doubt tightening my chest. “The deeper we dig, the more dangerous this becomes. Every step forward feels like walking on a razor’s edge.”

Her eyes met mine, steady and fierce. “That’s why we can’t do this alone.”

I thought of the people I trusted—the ones who'd stood by me through the pharma scandal, who believed in uncovering the truth no matter the cost.

“But first,” I said, “we have to get out of this place. The labyrinth isn't just physical—it's a trap. The hotel, the storm, the secrets—they're all designed to keep us here.”

Trisha reached out, her hand warm and reassuring. “We'll leave together. But not before we prepare.”

I nodded, the weight of our decision settling around us. This was no longer just about a story or a scandal. It was a battle for survival—and for the truth.

As the sun climbed higher, the hotel's shadows seemed to watch, waiting for our next move.

The weight of the manuscript sat heavy between us, a silent witness to the plans we whispered under the faint flicker of the bedside lamp. Outside, the remnants of the storm clattered against the

window, as if warning us that the world beyond the hotel was still wild and unrelenting.

“We’ll need a secure way to communicate once we’re out,” I muttered, pulling out my phone, half hoping the signal would surprise me.

Trisha shook her head. “This place scrambles everything. We’ll need old school—coded messages, dead drops. And people we can trust implicitly.”

I sighed. The web of deceit was tangled tighter than ever.

“First, we document everything,” I said, fingers brushing over the manuscript’s delicate pages. “Every secret, every name, every date. We turn it into a dossier that can’t be ignored.”

“But the hotel...” Trisha’s voice dropped. “The labyrinth still watches. Aarya’s not the only one guarding these secrets.”

The memory of Aarya’s cold smile, the manager’s knowing eyes, sent a chill down my spine. We weren’t just racing

against time. We were running from shadows.

“We can’t stay another night,” I said firmly. “We leave at first light.”

The room felt suddenly claustrophobic, the walls closing in like the very maze we sought to escape. Every creak in the floor, every flicker of the candlelight, felt like a signal—an invisible watcher poised to strike.

Trisha squeezed my hand. “No matter what happens, we face it together.”

A surge of resolve coursed through me. The labyrinth might have tested us, tried to break us. But we were still standing.

And we would fight for the truth—no matter the cost.

Night had fallen again over the hotel Monte rosa, but inside Room 213, a different kind of storm brewed. The quiet hum of the air conditioning was the only sound as Trisha and I moved cautiously, whispering in hushed tones

while packing the most vital evidence into my worn leather satchel.

Each item—a photograph, a note, a page torn from the manuscript—felt like a lifeline, fragile yet essential.

I glanced nervously at the door. The shadows beyond the frame seemed to press closer, the hotel no longer just a building but a living entity watching my every move.

“Do you think Aarya suspects anything?” I asked, voice barely above a breath.

Trisha’s eyes flicked toward the hallway outside. “She knows more than she lets on. But there’s someone else... someone who’s been watching us since we arrived. The real danger.”

A shiver ran down my spine. The feeling of being hunted settled like a stone in my gut.

We packed the last of the evidence and extinguished the lamp’s flame, plunging the room into darkness. I could feel

Trisha's breath, steady and calm beside me.

"Ready?" she whispered.

I nodded, swallowing the knot of fear.

"Let's go."

Stepping into the corridor, the silence was thick—too thick. The faintest creak echoed like a gunshot. I pressed my back against the cold wall, heart hammering.

Footsteps—slow, deliberate—approached.

I held my breath.

Trisha's hand found mine in the dark, squeezing.

The footsteps passed.

We exhaled quietly, moving forward in careful, measured steps.

The labyrinth was still alive, still closing in.

But we were not done fighting.

The corridor stretched before us, a dim tunnel cloaked in shadows and the lingering scent of damp wood and old stone. Every step echoed softly, threatening to betray our presence. My pulse hammered in my ears, a relentless drum urging caution.

Trisha moved like a shadow beside me—silent, precise. Her eyes scanned every corner, every flicker of movement beyond the reach of the feeble flashlight I'd pulled from my pocket.

“The storm’s ceased, but the labyrinth’s fury hasn’t,” she murmured. “We need to reach the service exit. It’s less guarded... if at all.”

I nodded, focusing on steadying my breath. The knowledge that we were being hunted tightened the invisible noose around my throat.

Halfway down the hall, a sudden creak behind us froze us in place.

I whipped around—empty corridor. But the feeling of unseen eyes pierced my skin.

“Someone’s here,” I whispered.

Trisha’s hand found mine again, grounding me. “Stay calm. We can’t afford mistakes.”

We pressed onward, turning a corner into a narrow stairwell that spiralled downward, the steps slick with moisture. The cold air bit at our skin, a reminder that the labyrinth was not just a place, but a force—relentless, unforgiving.

Reaching the service exit, I slid the heavy door open just enough to peer outside. The rain had stopped, leaving the grounds drenched and glistening under a pale moon.

A brief window—our chance.

We slipped through the door and into the night, the distant howl of wind our only companion.

But freedom was a fleeting promise.

Because in the distance, a shadow detached itself from the darkness—a figure watching, waiting.

The labyrinth's game was far from over.

The chill of the night air hit me like a wave, sharp and unforgiving. Every breath came out in shallow puffs, mingling with the mist that curled like ghosts around the drenched trees. The storm had left the world washed clean, but it also erased our cover—our footsteps now stark against the sodden earth.

Behind us, the faint crunch of boots on gravel shattered the silence, an ominous drumbeat that spurred us into a desperate sprint.

"Faster," I gasped, grabbing Trisha's arm. Her eyes flashed fierce determination, but the strain was clear on her face.

We darted between ancient oaks, their gnarled branches clawing at the sky,

each shadow a possible threat. The labyrinth wasn't done with us, and neither was whoever lurked in the darkness.

Ahead, the faint glow of a distant road beckoned—a promise of safety, or at least escape.

My lungs burned, legs aching, but the thought of capture was worse than pain.

Suddenly, a branch snapped sharply to our right. We veered instinctively, tumbling down a slippery embankment and landing hard on wet leaves.

Breathless and scratched, I pushed myself up. Trisha was already on her feet, eyes scanning.

“Did we lose them?” I whispered.

She shook her head slowly. “No. They’re close.”

From the shadows, a figure emerged—tall, silent, and relentless. The Custodian’s shadow had followed us beyond the labyrinth’s walls.

Trisha's grip tightened on my hand.
"This ends now."

The air was thick with cold sweat and the scent of damp earth as the figure stepped forward, the faint glow from the moon casting long shadows that danced with menace. The Custodian — or whatever he truly was — moved with a predatory calm, his eyes boring into mine like twin coals.

I swallowed hard, every instinct screaming to run, but my legs refused to obey.

Trisha's grip was iron, pulling me back from the brink of panic. "We're not afraid," she whispered fiercely.

The Custodian's lips curled into a cruel smile. "Fear is a luxury for the unprepared. You think you hold the truth, but truths are chains that bind as much as they liberate."

His voice was velvet wrapped around steel — soothing, yet deadly.

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered, heart pounding.

Without warning, he lunged, a swift movement that forced me to sidestep, the crunch of leaves beneath our feet masking the chaos that followed.

Trisha pulled a small object from her pocket — a flash of light that momentarily blinded him.

Seizing the moment, we bolted, adrenaline flooding every fibre.

Branches whipped past, the forest itself seeming to conspire against us. The Custodian’s footsteps thundered behind, relentless.

As we cleared the treeline, the distant hum of a highway reached us — salvation just within reach.

But the labyrinth’s shadow clung tight, a reminder that the fight for truth was far from over.

Chapter 18

Sanctury?

We slipped into the small roadside diner, a dimly lit haven that felt less like escape and more like a trap. The neon sign outside flickered erratically, casting uneasy shadows on the cracked linoleum floor. The smell of stale coffee and fryer oil filled the air — banal, unremarkable, but oddly comforting.

We chose a booth near the back, where we could watch the door without being noticed. The few other patrons — a tired waitress, a man scrolling through his phone — were indifferent to us, as though we were ghosts passing through.

I pulled out the manuscript, still damp from the rain, and spread it carefully on the table. Every page was a weight pressing down on my mind. The truth was no longer a puzzle; it was a noose tightening with every breath.

Trisha glanced around, eyes sharp. “We can’t trust anyone yet. Not until we know who’s watching.”

Her voice was low but tense — the kind of quiet that screamed paranoia. And rightly so. The hotel, the labyrinth — they had already shown me how quickly trust could turn to betrayal.

I nodded. “We need to be cautious, but we can’t do this alone. The story’s too big — too dangerous.”

Silence settled over us like a fog. Outside, the rain tapped steadily against the window, a rhythmic reminder that time was slipping away.

The real fight was just beginning.

The fluorescent light above flickered sporadically, casting a cold, jaundiced glow over the stained tabletop. Every detail in the diner—the cracked vinyl seats, the chipped paint on the window frame, the faint hum of the refrigerator—was unnervingly mundane.

Yet beneath that ordinary surface, an unshakable tension throbbed.

I kept my eyes on the door, watching every person who came and went. Each movement felt deliberate, every glance suspicious. The shadows cast by the tired overhead lights seemed to pulse with quiet menace.

Trisha leaned in, voice barely a whisper. “We’re still inside the labyrinth. It’s not just a place — it’s a mindset. A trap of fear and doubt.”

I nodded slowly, my fingers tracing the edge of a coffee cup that had long gone cold. “They’re waiting for us to slip. To make a mistake.”

The manuscript lay open between us like a minefield. Each line was a thread that could unravel everything — or pull us deeper into danger.

“Do you think they know where we are?”
I asked.

Trisha’s jaw tightened. “It’s only a matter of time. They always find you.”

A chill slid down my spine. The fight was no longer about facts or proof. It was a battle against silence itself — against those who wielded power in shadows.

I rubbed my temples, exhaustion washing over me. “We have to decide what to do next. Publish everything and risk blowing the lid wide open? Or wait, gather more proof, and risk being silenced forever?”

Her eyes met mine, fierce and unyielding. “There’s no waiting. Not anymore.”

Outside, the rain softened to a drizzle, but inside me, the storm raged on.

The labyrinth had claimed me.

And now, it was up to me to decide whether to break free — or be consumed.

Chapter 19

The Real Deal

And just as I was sitting there with Trisha, everything around me seemed to melt...I couldn't understand what was happening, and just when I was about to call out to her, I regained my senses.

I lay on my bed, not in my hotel room, but in my bedroom, my home. I stood up gingerly, bewildered; unable to understand what had just happened, I was at Matheran, with Trisha...

-And just then my phone rang, it was Trisha. I picked up.

“Are you ready Sameer? Let's go!”

“Go where Trisha!?”

“Matheran, just as we planned”.

About the Author

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